

CAGE-BIRDS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Novels

The Bottom of the Well

Martin Croft

Alvina Foster

Compassionate Adventure

Total War at Haverington

Wonderful Mrs Marriott

The Whirlpool

Backing Winds

To Let Furnished

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Fall over Cliff

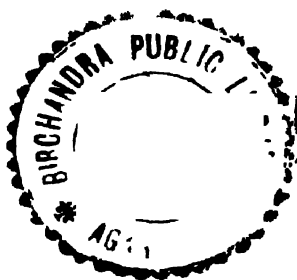
From Natural Causes

The Summer School Mystery

etc.

CAGE-BIRDS

by
JOSEPHINE BELL



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**To the memory of
G. W. D.**

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FIRST LEAVE

I

DEREK HOWARD'S eighteenth birthday was in the February. He found himself, by the middle of March, in a bleak part of Yorkshire, learning the ways of the Army. But three months later he was transferred south to Aldershot, and with a feeling of immense relief and inevitability he learned that a convenient bus was capable of taking him to Stansford within an hour of leaving his barracks.

Though he found this fitting into a desired pattern, it nevertheless surprised him very much, remembering the years he had lived not so very far from the great barracks at Aldershot. He remembered soldiers, plenty of them. That was natural, since the war had been going on then. But it had never occurred to him to ask where they all came from; perhaps because there was one permanent barrack at Stansford where a local regiment was housed, and there was also a big training camp built beyond its walls, and attached to it.

At first when he reached Aldershot he was in a fever of impatience to visit Stansford; to renew old friendships, especially to see the Trents. But he held back. He had been given two days' leave between finishing in Yorkshire and reporting to his new billet. And these two days he had spent at his own home in London. As a result he had put off Stansford from week to week, until now he was due for leave again, was going on forty-eight hours, to be exact, and had suddenly made up his mind what he wanted to do.

The Stansford bus wound its leisurely way along the pleasant country roads, shadowed by summer foliage. Red-faced, sweating women, with shopping baskets and children, and powdered girls, cool in cotton frocks, climbed up at every stop to join the hot crowd already squeezed into the narrow

seats of the bus. A trembling haze hung on its bonnet; blasts of hot air blew among the legs of the passengers every time it started up; while on the rear platform the ticket collector's unbuttoned white summer coat flapped madly.

Derek, uncomfortable in his thick uniform, kept taking off his service cap to mop his thick yellow hair and rosy brown face. The Army had filled him out and tanned him. With fatter cheeks than formally, the sensitive droop of his lips had lost its interest and gave him a merely sullen expression. But his blue eyes were the same as ever: steady, honest, not very quick nor very observant, but capable of attracting immediate sympathy.

In the intervals of mopping his face he clasped his big hands round his knees and stared out of the window, indifferent to his fellow passengers. The girl beside him realized this, and expressed her disappointment by moving away from him as far as she could. Since he continued to be wholly abstracted, she stood up at the next stop to offer her seat to an old woman standing in the aisle beside her. This prompted a man on the far side to give up his own seat to her; after which unusual act of chivalry, he stood for the rest of the journey supporting himself by the back of her seat. In this way his fingers touched her neck whenever the bus jolted, which was very often. She found this part of the ride much more satisfactory.

Derek, watching the road, and quite unaware of any of the people round him, was thinking how strange it was that he did not know this route at all. He did not even remember the names of the places they passed through, until suddenly there they were, running between houses he knew quite well, and he said to himself, "The Aldershot Road," realizing with a shock, for the first time, exactly what that meant. He had walked along the Aldershot Road to school for five years, and never knew until now that its name meant anything at all.

• The bus stopped at the end of the road, where the little hill led up to the crescent in which the Trents lived. But Derek sat on, not moving, as the town closed round him and the bus wound its way through several side-streets into the main shopping centre, and from there, at right angles, with the

wheel spinning wildly in the driver's hands, into a smart new bus-station, all green paint and sheltered queue-runs, and large-print notices.

Derek was glad he had come right into the town. His discovery about the Aldershot Road had already torn off one of the thick veils of his childhood. He understood, if dimly, that his other memories might be equally misleading or incomplete. The new bus-station confirmed it. In the old days there had been several decayed houses on this site, filled with the drearier kind of evacuee from the London slums. The corner where the bus had swung in so neatly to the wide scheduled tracks had been a slit between tall buildings; a haunt at night of dubious couples, glued to the walls, or moving stiffly away. Stansford had changed. Here were the green paint, the little groups of people in the queue-runs, instead of the lurching soldiers and the hard-faced girls in uniform. Derek laughed to himself, but his heart was heavy, and his laughter, of the mind only, soon stopped.

As he wandered slowly up the High Street of the town he saw other changes, other improvements. The shop that had been burnt out was rebuilt as a smart restaurant, with neon lighting over the door. The Town Hall had been done up, too; its balcony edge painted gold, its precious coat of arms put back in place. There were more cars about, and no uniforms to speak of. But Lyons, he saw with relief and warmth of heart, looked the same as ever, with the same little made-up meals on cardboard plates displayed in the window. After staring at these for a few minutes he turned in, pushed his way through the queue at the bread and cake counter, and sat down at a familiar marble table. The waitresses were all different from the ones he remembered, but they spoke the familiar Lyons language.

The heat had made him very dry. He ordered a cup of tea and a bath bun, and when they came drank thirstily, ordering another cup the next time he caught the girl's eye. He was not hungry, for the Army kept him well filled. So he merely crumbled the bun on his plate and soon pushed it away, waiting for the girl to pass him again. This time he ordered

an ice. The waitress took away the ruined bun and he heard her say something about "a shame" to another girl, who laughed, looking round at him over her shoulder. He rested his arms on the table, staring defiantly and sullenly down the shop. ~

He was astonished to remember that it was four years since he left Stansford to join his parents again in London, and nine years since he was evacuated from his home in the autumn of 1940. He had been nine, and Graham four, when a London double-decker bus drew up with their party in front of the Town Hall. He had tried to lift Graham off the bus by himself, but had only succeeded in toppling his little brother into the dust, where he had lain and howled until the tired guard had picked him up and told them both to "get the 'ell out of it." From the Town Hall, after a boring rest and scrappy meal with the crowd of excited weary women and children who had been his companions on the journey, he and Graham had been taken to Mrs Trent's house, and there they had stayed for five years. Five years of war that scarcely touched them at all, until the flying bombs came just before the end. Five years of school, where he had learned how to hold his own with the other boys, and how to pursue his own slow thoughts and interests without actively annoying his teachers. Five years of quiet loving care from Mrs Trent, gradually learning a way of living he had never dreamed of, until he forgot the sound of drunken screams breaking into sleep, and the sound of slapping blows, and sharp fights, and the hunger of neglect. Five years in which a curtain of comfortable peace hid the noise and petrol-smell and dirt, the grinding swinging trams charging down the middle of a broad road, the jingling hurdy-gurdies, the quick shrill laughter of London girls, the thin swagger of London boys, the immense surge of crowds round the shops at week-ends. Five years, during which small pale-faced Graham had grown into a strong active child of nine, far quicker at his lessons than his older brother, never still for a minute, always off to the river with his little net and an old jam jar on a string.

Derek moved his chair back sharply, and the waitress came

up, writing out his bill as she did so. She glanced at his damp yellow hair and sweating face.

"You do look hot," she said.

Derek did not smile.

"So would you be in a perishing uniform," he said bitterly.

"Don't you like the Army?"

"Don't I like . . . ?" He struggled for words, but found only blasphemies. "No, I don't like the bleeding Army. Nor I don't like . . ."

"That's no way to talk in here," the waitress said, sweeping up the crocks on to her tray. "Pay at the desk, please."

He obeyed her, feeling miserably that he had done himself less than justice, and that women were hell, anyway, always putting . . . in the wrong. He paid his bill and walked back along the High Street, to stand on the river bridge, staring down at the water.

Graham was the trouble, of course. It was on Graham's account that he had found his way over to Stansford on this hot July afternoon. Because Graham had never properly taken to London life again, and now, at twelve, with three more years of school to attend, was in grim warfare with his world.

It had been easier for Derek to go back. He was fourteen and his schooldays were over. The State did not, as yet, enforce a final year of idleness upon unacademic minds. He knew he was no scholar and that book knowledge held no smallest interest for him. He wanted to be a motor mechanic. That was easy. At the end of the war, with few men released from the Army, it was simple to find a job at a good wage, much more than a beginner's wage should be. But Derek was worth his pay; he was a good lad, keen and adaptable. His slowness was no hindrance: it gave him the patience he needed to master his craft. He was soon earning his money, and became established at his garage as a fixture. The other men liked him because he was not cheeky and because he listened to their advice. When the foreman came back from the Army to his old job he took a fancy to Derek. He kept a friendly eye on the boy and saw that he was not always set

to mend punctures and do other dull jobs. His kindness was repaid with the first hero-worship Derek had ever shown.

But it was harder for Graham. He was too young to be independent, and he had to go to a new school with a new set of companions, very different from those he had known and led at Stansford. The new lot were tough, wild, savage, quick-witted children, full of ridicule and laughter, suspicious, alert. Some of them had dodged among the blitzed buildings of their native borough all through the war, knowing raids, and shelters, confusion, misery, danger, fire, blood and death. These children had a certain contempt for returned evacuees. They thought them cissy. If the newcomers were inclined to resent their barbarous surroundings, as Graham did, they were considered snobs and treated accordingly.

Not that Graham pined for Mrs Trent and her home. He seemed to forget the war years with astonishing speed and thoroughness. He left Stansford when he was nine, and a year later said quite seriously to Derek that he couldn't even remember what Auntie looked like, except that she was fat. The only thing he did remember clearly was the river, or rather the jam-jars of minnows which he had been used to range along Mrs Trent's garden fence where the yard left off and the flower-bed began.

Derek had not seriously worried about his young brother until he found himself torn away from him into the Army. Then he began to understand how much the habit of care, almost of parenthood, had grown upon him. He had been Graham's nursemaid at Stansford when they first arrived there, not allowing anyone but himself to wash and feed the child. Later he had shared with Auntie the upbringing of the active enterprising creature, so unlike himself, yet so bound to him by dependence and love and a common strangeness to their surroundings. After they were back in London, Derek tried to continue in this task alone. He had seen to it that Graham suffered from the change no more than was inevitable. He had succeeded—until the Army took him.

Impatient of his thoughts Derek turned from the centre of

the river bridge, and moving off it, came to a gap at the side, through which he passed on to the towpath. He ran down the slope to the bottom of the bridge, walked through its tunnel beneath the road, and continuing on the path came to the river bank opposite the gas works. He began to walk along the towpath, away from the town.

He knew this part of the river very well. The coarse grass beside him, growing under neglected walls, went on until the path widened out to a big wood-yard. A mill pool lay opposite, with the mellow brick wall of the long-disused mill rising up beyond the pool. Once past the wood-yard the river turned across waste land littered with rubbish, too marshy for buildings or playing fields, or for any other useful purpose, and a depressing sight to him now, in his present mood.

He remembered bitterly what a gold-mine that dreary place had seemed only five years ago. Full of unexpected treasure. He had spent whole Saturday afternoons here, grubbing among the bricks and old cans and other refuse, while Graham lay at the water's edge, patiently plying his net in the stream. He had felt rewarded if he had found an empty cartridge case from a soldier's pocket, or a discarded marble or lost penknife.

He walked on slowly. He knew his steps were taking him in the direction he desired to go, but as he proceeded shyness began to take hold of him and this made his temper rise. When some children, intent on a floating log, pushed past him, he cursed them so suddenly that they were startled. But seeing his round, good-natured young face below the fierce blue eyes, they made rude gestures at him, and laughed in their high voices. He felt inclined to run after them and knock their heads together, but he was too hot. He unbuttoned his battle-dress instead, slipping his belt into his hand, ready to attack them if the children annoyed him again.

But they were far ahead by now, chattering over their floating log, and throwing fresh sticks into the water as they followed it.

No one else came that way. The noise of the motor road ahead, beyond the edge of the waste land, began to take the

place of the town noises he had left. He could not yet see the road, because tall hoardings bearing advertisements stood along the verge. He could only see the framework of these hoardings, like the backs of houses on a cinema studio set. Hoardings and telegraph poles, then the road, the cross-roads half a mile along it, and the little hill where he might have got down from his bus as he came along the Aldershot Road earlier that afternoon.

When he reached the backs of the hoardings Derek chose a familiar secluded spot, relieved himself, and after doing up his buttons, fastened his battle-dress also and resumed his belt.

He still felt oppressed by shyness, but inside his mind he was more settled and more confident. The towpath had been reassuring, unchanged, even to the behaviour of the children who had loosed his pent-up irritation. It was he who had changed, not Stansford, he decided. In fact it had altered surprisingly little. Compared with his own home borough of Wandsworth.

When he thought of his home his round, rather expressionless face grew stubborn, and the slow anger inside him began to mount. Graham must not be left there for two years: it was dangerous: anything might happen. Already the boy had been had up for fishing in a static water tank; not mainly on account of the fishing, but because a smaller boy had fallen in and nearly drowned. Now the tanks in their neighbourhood had been drained at last, but there were other dangers. Graham must be re-evacuated, he told himself, in the official-born jargon of his time. And preferably to Mrs Trent, Auntie, who had managed him so easily before, without his ever noticing what she was doing.

He reached the cross-roads, and turned off up the hill. Colebrook Road was startlingly familiar, he found, even to the separate flowering shrubs that hung their blossoms over the fences. Soon Anvil Crescent opened out in front of him; the same houses, the same gates, even the same little mound of gravel at the corner, pushed up by the tyres of trade vans taking the turn too fast, or braking as they hesitated over it.

He walked slowly down its length. Number Two, 'Ardcot,' 'Firs,' Number Eight, and then the bend round the top of the crescent, 'Capri,' 'The Lantern'—and a girl hanging her arms over the name on the next gate. But the name swung as well on a little signboard above the front door; he could see it over her head. 'Monteve.' Because Mr Trent's name was Montague, and Mrs Trent's was Evelyn.

The girl, with a lock of brown hair falling down her forehead, had evidently just finished talking to her neighbour across the curved end of the crescent. She looked up from the gate and saw Derek. He was obviously approaching, but she knew that no one of his age and appearance lived in Anvil Crescent. So she lifted her head and waited, until he stood on the other side of the gate, awkwardly fingering his belt.

After a silence which she did nothing to break, he said heavily, "Mrs Trent. Has she left here?" Then, before she could answer, his face broke into smiling amazement, as he exclaimed, "If it isn't our Marion! Well, I'll be blowed!"

II

MRS TRENT'S daughter, now genuinely surprised, kept her advantage with a technique superior to her age, which was two years less than Derek's. She stared him in the eyes until he turned a deep pink, and then said casually, "What's so wonderful about that? I could see who you were a mile off."

That this was untrue, Derek was perfectly aware. The lie could not, however, be brought home to her. So, with a desperate sense of injustice, of losing his grip upon the situation, and indeed, his whole contact with reality, he blundered on, "I came to see Auntie. Is she there?"

The girl's dark eyes regarded him sombrely. She had been interested by the approach of this smashing soldier, as she had described him to herself. Then she had recognized him by his voice, and suddenly romance had seemed to beat on silver

wings round and round Anvil Crescent. After all these years her childhood's companion, her ex-boy-friend of schooldays, had come to look for her. The disappointment of his next inquiry brought her back with a jerk to the mysterious boredom of ordinary life.

"I'm afraid she's out."

"Will she be back? I mean, can I wait till she comes?"

"I don't mind," said Marion sulkily, and then, realizing she was still holding the gate and he was waiting on the other side of it, her natural gaiety asserted itself. She laughed, stepping back with a flourish.

"Come on in," she said, waving her arm towards the front door.

Derek pulled off his cap and put it on again, red-faced and sweating, and cursing womankind in all its manifestations; but he went forward. The little gate clanged behind him, and instinctively he turned to fix the awkward latch. It was unchanged since his boyhood, only a little more rusted and bent. He smiled at it as he coaxed it into place.

They went in by the back door, "Because the front one sticks," Marion told him. The Council had used cheap wood when it made these houses between the wars: wood that had warped: there was nothing to be done about it, as Mr Trent constantly affirmed. Derek followed Marion round to the back door; it was the way he had always entered the house.

The interior was very much the same as he remembered it. There was the small kitchen first, not exactly dirty, but used too much ever to be wholly tidy and clean. Something was cooking slowly on the gas-stove, bubbling over occasionally with a hissing noise and a smell of burning. The dinner things had been washed up and cleared away, but two cups with the dregs of tea in the bottom stood on the draining-board, and a plate of biscuits lay on the top of the refrigerator. Parcels of food, with their paper about them still, stood on the small table at the centre of the kitchen.

"Mum had to get off in a hurry," Marion said, excusing this habitual state of the kitchen. "She wouldn't even stop for her dinner, in case of being late."

"Where's she gone?" he asked.

He had followed her into the back sitting-room, where they had their meals on a square, polished table, standing against one wall. He had walked over to the long windows that opened into the garden, and stood there now, looking out at the small lawn and the little flower bed along the wall, bright with summer flowers. He had always liked this room better than the front one, where the faded, carefully-preserved arm-chairs and settee added their stuffy smell to the close air of curtained, sealed windows, everlasting flowers, and a multitude of china ornaments, photographs in frames, and musty music on an unused piano.

Here in the back room he had done his home-work, and listened to the wireless, and played ludo with Mr Trent after Graham was in bed. Here Mrs Trent had mended clothes and Marion had knitted herself an endless succession of dolls' clothes, and then, as she grew older, jumpers for herself. So intent was he on his memories that he hardly listened for the answer to his question. When it came he was startled out of his abstraction.

"She's gone up to the hospital. It's her day," said Marion.

Derek stared at her, the redness of his face paling with alarm. It was inconceivable that Auntie was ill. She had never had a day's illness since he first knew her. When the children were down with colds or 'flu or tonsillitis or any of the infectious diseases from whooping cough to mumps, she was always the same, calm, stout, smiling, ready with the right word or the right meal or the right kind of gentle caress. She couldn't be ill herself now. Permanently ill, Marion's words suggested. Her day at the hospital.

"What's up with her?" he asked roughly.

Marion said nothing. An overwhelming shyness took hold of her. At sixteen her mother's reason for going to hospital seemed very indecent, not to be mentioned aloud if you could help it, certainly not to a boy of Derek's age, with whom she was alone in the house. Once more, as she looked at him, romance stirred tremulously beside her and the air quickened. Her eyes followed the strong line of his shoulders.

"She isn't really bad, is she?" Derek demanded sharply. The girl's strange looks and silence had begun to affect him. He felt that the house was full of new secrets, unknown developments. A pile of dead days, like a great slag-heap, had collected during the years he had been away: it stood between him and the life he had known there. And somewhere behind it Mrs Trent was lingering at the hospital, suffering perhaps; perhaps fatally ill. He knew all the common jargon of disease, for he heard it continually: it was a chief topic of conversation anywhere. He had learned that women were often ailing, that they were always having unspecified operations. He knew quite well what that meant—cancer, or something as bad. So now he turned back to the window, staring at the straggle of runner beans on poles beyond the grass of the lawn. "She won't be back till six, I shouldn't think," said Marion, evading his question. "Shall I make you a cup of tea?"

He was just going to say no, he must be getting on home, when a heavy scratching heralded a bouncing thud, and a large black dog pushed into the room. He was of no particular breed, this dog, and he was old and stiff, with a greying muzzle and eyes that showed the onset of cataract. But Derek put his hands round the dog's neck in a sudden impulse of joy.

"Porter!" he cried, and then as the animal backed away, "Porter, you old so-and-so, don't you know your old pal, Derek?"

Porter, it was clear, did not pay much attention to this appeal. But he liked friendliness in visitors, so he moved closer again, wagging himself from side to side and turning up his frosted eyes to Derek's face.

"He knows me all right," said the latter. "Shows his age, though."

"Dad says he's getting past it," said Marion shortly. "He's three parts blind. I'll put the kettle on."

With Porter to keep him company, Derek stayed where he was, and when Marion brought in the tea and the plate of biscuits he had seen on the refrigerator, he let himself go and

told her about Aldershot and his training and the garage he worked in at Wandsworth. He did not mention his own home, nor Graham. Those were subjects for Mrs Trent's sympathetic ear. He groaned inwardly at the wreck of his plans. How long would she be ill, attending the hospital or worse? He dared not ask Marion. Her manner when she first spoke of her mother had forbidden further inquiry. But he allowed himself one question.

"I'd like to pop over again some time," he ventured, "to see Auntie, as I've missed her today. Would it be convenient in a week or two?"

"I really don't know," the girl answered.

"A month then?"

"C'm on!" She was emphatic this time. "Not a month. Mum wouldn't be able . . . She won't . . ."

Her voice died away. She understood from his horrified expression that she was giving him an entirely false idea, but her obstinate modesty, while it flushed her cheeks, kept her silent.

Derek put down his empty cup and rose to his feet.

"Thanks a lot," he said. "I'll be moving. Graham would like to be remembered to you all, if he knew I'd been. Tell Auntie I was ever so sorry to miss her."

He stooped to hide his emotion by stroking Porrier's ears. The old dog moved stiffly after him to the gate.

"Look in again when you're passing," said Marion politely, ignoring her former ban on his visits. Now that he was going she could have kicked herself for her tongue-tied reception of him. It was always the same. It was all right actually going out with a boy, walking along, riding in a bus, standing in a cinema queue, holding hands when you got inside. But talk to them! That was when she lost her wits altogether. And he did look smashing, leaning against the gate on the outside, staring along the Crescent as if he expected someone to come round the corner any minute. Of course. He was hoping Mum would be back in time. But she couldn't be. It would be the last straw if she did, anyway.

She was trying to think how she could push him off and get

him going when he turned round abruptly, said, "Cheerio, girl," in an absent-minded voice that infuriated her suddenly, and swinging on his heel with a smart military movement, strode away down the middle of the road. In a few seconds he reached the corner, and disappeared from sight without turning again to wave to her.

Marion called the dog and walked slowly back into the house. The silence there filled her with melancholy. Her lost opportunities, like the limp discarded rags of dressmaking, seemed to litter the floor of the room where she had entertained her visitor. She sat down by the open window, giving herself up to day-dream.

Here Mrs Trent found her when she got back from the hospital. By that time the girl had roused herself to lay the tea and start another kettle, but she was gazing out into the garden, her chin resting on one hand, when her mother walked into the room.

"You must be sick and tired of waiting, dear," said Mrs Trent. "And no wonder. You can make the tea. I'll be glad of it and no mistake. I'm just about whacked."

She peeled off the heavy top coat she was wearing, in spite of the heat, for convention's sake, and sank into the chair Marion had left. She was stout at all times: in her present condition her blue-and-white patterned dress, tightly drawn over her great arms and bosom, was further so stretched across her stomach that a sudden movement of the baby within was clearly visible to the girl, who turned away abruptly with a scarlet face. Mrs Trent, settling herself without noticing her daughter's confusion, tried in vain to pull the dress down over her legs. But there simply was not enough material to do all that was required of it, so she gave up the hopeless attempt, and lay back, a grotesque, bulging mass, to wait for her tea.

Coming in again with the brewed pot, Marion delivered the news of the afternoon. She soon found her tongue, and told her mother the story of Derek's visit with more animation and wit than she had displayed at any time during his stay.

"Been 'aving a high old time, I see," said Mrs Trent.

"I must say, after all these years, you'd 'ave thought 'e'd give us a bit of a warning."

"They never know," said Marion, automatically defending her contemporary. "Not in the Forces, they don't. Anyhow, people don't bother all that much now."

"It wouldn't be a bad thing if they did." Mrs Trent glanced at her daughter slyly. "What did he say to our new addition?" She patted her great belly, smiling happily.

Marion turned away her head.

"I didn't say."

"You didn't tell 'im?"

"No. It's not the sort of thing you can just come out with."

"I don't know why not. Didn't 'e ask for me?"

"Ch, yes. It was you he'd come to see. He was ever so disappointed. He asked where you were, and I said up at the hospital, and he looked serious the way people do when it's illness, and you could see he thought it was something bad, but he didn't say anything more, so neither did I."

"You big cissy," said Mrs Trent, half laughing, half annoyed. "Whyever not? It's nothing to be ashamed of, is it? Of course, I know you're sixteen and it's a big gap, but if we hadn't lost Ernie it'd only be nine years."

"I know, Mum." The embarrassed voice was very low.

"Well, your Dad's proud of me, if you aren't."

This deepened the girl's blush again, but she managed to say huskily, "I *am* pleased."

"You don't show it. Keeping it dark before Derek Howard, who was just like a brother to you, him and little Graham. Why did you think I was so keen to have them 'ere all those years, if not to keep us from fretting over Ernie?"

Marion's head sank lower still. Certainly she had never thought of Derek as a brother. In her mind there still floated in a golden mist a day-dream of Derek, quite unbrotherly, holding her in his arms. Now her mother's words only lifted him still higher into her realm of fairy princes. She was ashamed too, because she hardly remembered her little brother, only the day of his funeral, which she had spent with the neighbour next door, being petted and fed on an unusual

quantity of sweets. She had never spoken of Ernie to Derek; she wondered if her mother had ever done so.

"He's been away so long," she grumbled.

"Who? Derek?"

"Yes. Not writing or anything."

"'E wouldn't be much of a writer. 'E did always send a card Christmas time."

"With no address on it. We never could write him back."

Longing to escape from further discussion of Derek, Marion declared she could hear Porter whining at the back door, and jumping up, hurried out of the room.

Mrs Trent stared at the girl's empty place. She felt exasperated, amused, and filled also with a gentle pity for youth and its ways. She had always wanted to bring up Marion in a common-sense manner, not making too much or too little of what the papers called the facts of life. But young people went by what the others said and did, not what their parents told them. Marion's schoolmates at the County Secondary must have been giving themselves airs. Or perhaps it was just her age, a difficult time for a girl, sixteen. It was just natural shyness. And being at school still; it didn't bring them on. She remembered how she herself had left school at fourteen to go straight into service with a rich old woman who already had two elderly maids. There wasn't much she didn't hear from these two in the first six months of her time there. But Marion was still a schoolgirl; all the fault of getting the scholarship. She was never quite sure if she approved, in spite of its prestige value, as Dad called it.

She sighed, thinking again of her own youth. Would she herself, at Marion's age, have blurted out the state of affairs at home to a young man? Probably not, but the times were stricter then—and nastier. It had been rude then to mention any part of the body except the hands and face.

• She gave a little grunting exclamation, part impatience with the dragging gait of Marion's growth, part sheer discomfort in her own body. Even sixteen long years were not enough to make a grown woman; even eight and a half long months were not enough to bring a living baby into the world. Time

didn't march on, whatever they said. It crawled. But no complications this time, the doctor had told her. And only two weeks to go. If only it wasn't so almighty hot.

"Well," she demanded, as Marion sat down again. "Was it Porter?"

"I filled up his bowl," the girl said defensively. "I expect it was water he wanted."

"When's Derek coming over again?"

"He didn't say."

"Meaning you didn't ask 'im? You great duffer, you." Then, seeing her daughter's eyes fill with tears she gave a throaty laugh. "Never mind. Come and give your old Mum a kiss."

Willingly Marion hugged her and was comforted.

"Just a child," thought Mrs Trent, aware of the clinging arms with deep inner contentment. "That's all she is. A child."

This was not at all how Derek Howard thought of her in the intervals of hitch-hiking to London.

He walked out to the London main road and there soon found a lorry which took him as far as Esher. It left him at the beginning of the Kingston by-pass, and here his luck failed him for half an hour. He did not reach Putney until after five.

In the lorry, noise and dust made conversation difficult. Both he and the driver gave it up, and Derek was glad to have some time to himself to recover from his recent encounter with Marion Trent, and to get over his disappointment at not seeing her mother.

Marion had stirred him most uncomfortably. He had left a leggy, shapeless child with lank dark hair and a spotty face. Five years had turned her into a terrifying stranger, with Marion's voice, much of Marion's manner, all of her former reticence, and a new, alarming exterior. She was a good-looker, and no mistake. Well turned out too, even in her ordinary things, not expecting compæny. He wondered what job she was in. He wouldn't have minded taking her out, only of course Netta wouldn't like that if she heard of it. And

anyway Marion, he remembered, was only sixteen. Too much of a kid, really, though she didn't look one. Naturally, he'd tell Netta that Marion was just like a sister. His uneasy mind suggested that this was rubbish, and he drifted off into a country idyll where Marion and he sat in a sunlit field under the shade of a tall tree. Then he remembered Mrs Trent's absence from home, her probable illness or worse, and he began to curse his own confused, sentimental imaginings. It was all a washout; as he might have known it would be. The past was over. Nothing ever brought it back. "Be your age," he told himself savagely.

At Putney Bridge he took a trolley bus. He was tired of hitching, and it wasn't so easy in London itself. When the bus came to the corner of Wandsworth High Street he got out to walk the rest of the way.

It was not far. A couple of turns from the main road and he found himself in his home street. First a row of small shops, then the block of workmen's flats, old-fashioned, the Peabody type. Then two tall, nondescript houses with flights of steep steps to their front doors, relics of a far-off Victorian prosperity when this was an elegant suburb. Beyond these a long row of smaller houses, all red-brick with iron-fenced tiny front gardens. In the first of the tall houses the Howard family lived on the second floor up.

As Derek turned into this street he felt all his old accustomed shrinking and distaste for his home, increased unbearably by his visit to Stansford. It added anger to his charged emotions, and, though he did not recognize the sensation, shame.

Graham, his brother, who was swirling about the street on roller-skates, gave a whoop of joy when he saw Derek. He flew up to him, scattering the other children to right and left and nearly knocking him down in the fervour of his arrival.

"Hold up, there, hold up!" shouted Derek, as Graham's skates clawed at the pavement.

Laughing and clutching one another, the two brothers climbed the steep front steps of their home together.

III

DEREK'S mother was dressing herself in untidy haste; she heard the sound of roller-skates clattering up the stairs, and paused in her muddled search for a pair of stockings. She had told Graham to go down and play, but here he was back up as usual, with his skates on too, which she had forbidden. It would take her ten minutes at least to send him off again, and here she was only half ready to go out. Those dratted stockings! Where the hell . . . ?

She came across her slip while she searched for the stockings, and forgetting her original object, began to pull it over her head. The noise on the stairs increased, while two voices raised in laughter woke recognition in her dulled brain. Derek was back.

She repeated this to herself aloud, staring into the mirror. Behind her own reflection she saw the door open and two smiling faces, one above the other, appear in it. She swung round with a lurching movement, letting her cigarette fall with her opening mouth, so that it hung loose, caught in her smeared lipstick.

"Get out!" she said with vicious emphasis.

Derek, used as he was to his mother's slatternly ways, was shocked. Three months' absence made him notice things he usually took for granted. The grey sheets on the unmade bed, the heap of dirty, tawdry clothes, and worst of all, his mother's face, devastated by her endless self-indulgence, puffy from her recent, exhausted sleep.

In feature and colouring Mrs Howard was very like her son. The same yellow hair, but faded now and its colour replaced by a hard tangerine-coloured dye; the same blue eyes, but sunk in fatty sockets and reddened by whisky; the same round cheeks, bloated here and sagging; the same sensitive mouth, loosened by excess. A grotesque caricature of the boy, who stood looking at her, surprised by the strength of his own disgust.

"You ought to know better'n not to knock on a lady's door," shouted Mrs Howard. "Get out, the pair of you!"

The two faces withdrew. Roused by the necessity of attacking her sons, she found her stockings without further difficulty, fastened her suspenders in one breath, an unusual feat, and went on to force herself into a black satin dress, whose very low neckline exposed the greater part of her large bust. The satin of the dress was rubbed and threadbare over the seat and also at the level of her right knee in front, where her forearm had to rest with a glass while she drew beer from the barrel.

When she had hooked herself after a fashion into this dress, she put a triple row of glass pearls round her neck and a blue artificial-enamel clip, in the shape of a bow, on the side of her tangerine hair. Adding a little additional make-up to the old, which she had not bothered to wash off before she went to sleep, she took a final look at herself in the mirror. The sight seemed to please her, for she nodded approval of it before gathering up a coat from the bed. Then, managing the doors with exaggerated care, she swayed across the landing into the living-room of her so-called flat.

This, like her bedroom, was in a state of indescribable disorder. Newspaper and cigarette ends, empty milk bottles, decayed fruit, half-eaten food, rags, old shoes, dirty soap without a dish to stand on, odds and ends of cosmetics; all were flung down on any flat surface that was handy. The room did not want for furnishings, and there was a good wireless set standing beside a modern, cream-painted electric fire. A pall of black London dust covered everything.

When she went in, Derek and Graham were standing near the window looking down into the street. The younger boy was explaining some favourite game to his brother, while Derek listened eagerly, glad to have his back to the squalor of the room. It had always been pretty messy there, he knew, but today it was worse than he ever remembered it. Used as he was to rough living, he recognized here a decay that went beyond carelessness, beyond indulgence. He thought of the Trents' kitchen: there was food about there nearly always,



but that was because several hearty appetites needed constant attention, and not always at the same time. This was different. Some of these plates with their fly-blown remains had been there for days. It was a wonder, he thought, that Graham didn't catch something, with all that muck in the place.

When his mother came in he heard the door open, and knew whose uncertain step it was, but he did not turn round. Graham, however, stopped his chatter at once.

"Are you on leave?" asked Mrs Howard in her permanently hoarse voice. "Or left of your own accord?"

This suggestion roused a virtuous patriotism in Derek, something he was very far from expressing when he was with his unit.

"Yeah, I'm on leave," he said slowly. "Why? Did you think I'd hopped it?"

"I only wondered."

"I wouldn't be so bloody silly, for one thing, and for another they don't treat you all that bad."

His eyes wandered about the room. Mrs Howard resented his unspoken criticism.

"All right. They treat you like a young lord, so you look down on your own 'ome, don't you? How d'you expect me to be in two places at once? Working my fingers to the bone for the pack of you. I'm late as it is. I can't stand 'ere arguing. Where's my bag? Where did I put that . . . ?"

Something in her harassed, disjointed speech roused Derek's curiosity.

"Not given up the 'Bear,' have you?" he asked slowly.

"Me give up the 'Bear'? Not likely. I bin there fifteen years come October. No, I've not give it up, but I go for a couple of hours to the Regal every morning as well. And if that isn't a full day's work, I should like to know what is."

"You'd be better putting in a couple of hours here at home," said Derek, stung by her tone.

"Oh, I would, would I? And what 'ave I got to live on, me and Graham?"

"The pub was always an extra. You always said so."

"Well, it isn't now, see. It's a necessity."

"Dad hasn't lost his job, has 'e?"

This would explain much, but he did not think it was possible. Mr Howard's position as gas-fitter, formerly to the Company, and now to the Board, had always been as secure as the walls of the house. More so, when the war was on.

"It wouldn't be anything to grin at if he had," said his mother sharply.

"I wasn't grinning, as you call it."

"Oh, no! Only picking on me, as usual. They must 'ave given you some queer ideas in the Army, I will say."

"We aren't talking about the Army. We're talking about your jobs. Why don't you do your own work instead of other people's?"

"I'll tell you for why. Because I got to live, same as everyone else, see?"

"But Dad gets good money, I tell you."

She seized the dramatic opportunity.

"And who gets the benefit of it? You tell me that!"

She clutched her neck where the sun-reddened "V" of the day-time hours stood out against the surrounding white skin. She leaned forward, planted her hands on the table, and spat out, in a manner copied from the films, "That woman of his. That's who gets it!"

Derek decided that his first impression had been right. She was sozzled; probably had been all day. His mother interpreted his expression correctly.

"I know what you're thinking," she said, "but you're wrong. He's left, all right. Week before last. Some bitch up on the Common. Lives in a prefab. You can see 'is letter. I'll show you. After all these years. To walk out on the mother of 'is sons. Where the 'ell . . . ?"

She was gasping and sobbing now, tears of self-pity streaming from her blurred eyes. Derek stood in stony, embarrassed silence until she found a crumpled note stuck behind an ornament on the mantelpiece.

'Dear Maud,' the note began. 'I am not coming back so you can put that in your pipe and smoke it. It was a hell on

earth and more than flesh and blood can stand. So I am not coming back no more and wild horses won't make me. I am in good hands and loving care. More than you ever did. Yours truly, Mr Alfred Howard.'

"How do you know it's a prefab?" asked Derek curiously, handing back the note.

"He's been seen. One of my customers at the 'Bear' seen 'im. With a dark woman, 'e said. Going into a prefab on the Common."

"Was he sure it was Dad?"

"He said so. I know it's true. Alf did a job on one of those prefabs, back in May. Fixing a stove, I think it was. I remember because I thought they was all electric, but 'e said, no, gas was laid on about half of them. He was full of it at the time. I might 'ave known. Catch 'im getting all excited over his work in the ordinary way; too blooming used to it. It did cross my mind it was peculiar. That woman, of course; that was what was exciting him. After all these years . . ." She gulped, and the tears ran down her cheeks, making channels in the stale powder. "After all I've done for 'im."

Derek moved towards the door. The situation was getting beyond him. If the report were true, his father had deserted home, wife, and child—especially child. It was a wicked act to desert Graham. But there was a lot to be said on his father's side. Derek had known that all his life. In a sudden panic now he ran downstairs and into the street.

Mrs Howard struggled her way into her coat, dabbing at her face with the back of her hand whenever it was free.

"Unfeeling young monkey," she kept muttering. "A fat lot 'e cares. Didn't turn a hair. Bloody unfeeling young . . ."

She found her bag: miraculously it was there, just under her hand. All the way downstairs and round the corner of the street into the main road and along its busy thoroughfare to 'The Bear and Pole' she worked up her excuses for her boss; Derek's arrival, his hunger, his recent homesickness.

"What was a mother to do, Mr Biggs? I'm ever so sorry I'm late. Really I am."

"All right, Maudie. There's not many in yet. Make it snappy now, though, if you can."

'The Bear and Pole' slowly filled with customers; a regular steady lot, who drank moderately, smoked, threw darts, chatted together, sat looking at newspapers, or merely leaned on the bar gazing beyond it into space.

Mrs Howard, restored to an atmosphere in which her personality could expand unchecked, drew beer, and poured it into glasses, and mopped the counter, and took the money in a frenzy of work and goodwill. When there was a lull in the number of new arrivals she found herself a little tot of whisky, which she hid in a convenient place on a shelf under the counter. Mr Biggs was quite aware of this manoeuvre, but he did not interfere. Maudie was worth three of the young girl, Peggy, at her work, and she was a nice change, now and then, from Mrs Biggs, the silent and rheumatic wife who served occasional customers in the saloon bar, and who had relatives at Bexhill to whom he sent her when he felt he needed this change. Looking at Maud Howard's generous bosom jutting above the counter as she handed glasses across, he thought that perhaps another little change was due quite soon. Better now than later. He had to take his entire family to Bexhill in August. Now his eldest boy Harry could drive the car, a nice run for Ma tomorrow would be just the ticket. He made for the beer barrels below the counter. As Mrs Howard stooped, he stooped with her.

"O.K. tomorrow, same time?" he muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

"Derek mayn't 'ave gone," she answered with an exaggerated pout. "I never knew a thing. He walked straight into my room without so much as a knock on the door. Manners! You'd think no one ever mentioned such a thing in his presence. It was the evacuation. I ought never . . ."

"No go, then?" said Mr Biggs, cutting short a familiar tirade.

"I really couldn't say. 'E might not stay, but then 'e might not start back till late."

"Okey-doke, ducks. Some other time."

He patted her thigh as he rose from his stooping position.

Mrs Biggs, in her select and very quiet part of the House, moved uneasily on her chair behind the counter. Her back ached and her wrists were swollen up again, and there was no one sympathetic leaning on the bar to whom she could confide her growing disabilities.

Her husband looked in once during the evening, and again just before closing time, but he did not say anything about a trip to Bexhill. She was glad of this, because she had been afraid he might, with the weather so good. She didn't want to go: the car would only play up her back and her knees. But she never liked to dispute anything; George Biggs was not the kind of man you could argue with. She had found that out from the start. If it hadn't been for Harry she would never have stayed on with George. Harry made everything worth while.

IV

DEREK'S impulse to get away from his mother had taken him out into the street, but he did not know what to do with himself when he got there. Graham soon suggested a purpose; one that he found he was quite willing to share.

"I'm hungry," Graham said, spinning round and round on his skates. "Why don't we go along to Wickingses and get a bob's worth?"

They moved away in the direction of the small shops at the end of the street, by so doing avoiding Mrs Howard as she hurried out of her house in the opposite direction.

There were five shops in the row: a very seedy grocer's, where the window glass was so dirty it was difficult to make out the names on the display of cartons and tins inside; a fried-fish shop; a newsagent and tobacconist; a hairdresser, showing an aspidistra, surrounded by cards of hair grips and hair tonic in bottles, against a draped background of faded pink silk;

and the local branch of a combine dairy, where there was always a stack of metal trays for milk bottles piled up on the pavement outside the shop.

"Skate," said Graham, as they drew near enough to read the white chalk notice on a small blackboard in the fish-frier's window. "I like skate."

"I'm getting a paper first," answered Derek. "And some fags. You'd better wait outside."

Mr Marshman, the tobacconist, was serving a number of late customers. Derek took his turn in the queue. But Graham, impatient for his supper, started swinging himself to and fro by means of the movable rack for papers that hung just outside the door of the shop.

"Leave that alone, you young limb!" Mr Marshman called angrily, as boy and papers swung across his field of vision.

Everyone in the shop turned round, including Derek.

"If you have it off the wall again, Graham Howard, it won't be only a talking-to this time. You see if it won't."

Derek took a couple of strides towards the door.

"Behave," he said in his gruffest voice. "If you don't want a clip over the ear."

Graham continued to swing, so Derek reached for him with a long arm. But the boy was too quick. Bending double, he jumped the step of the shop, dived under his brother's outstretched hand and skated straight across the floor. When he reached the end of the shop he was going much too fast to be able to stop. With feet together, wobbling madly, he found himself, at high speed, approaching a half-glassed door. He put up both arms to protect his face, and amid the shouts and cries of the onlookers, hit the glass a shattering blow. Fortunately the door flew open as the glass cracked, so instead of plunging through it Graham fell instead into the room behind, hitting his head smartly against the very solid leg of a large mahogany table.

A shrill scream from Mrs Marshman inside the room was followed by complete silence.

"That boy'll come to a bad end—like his mother," said Mr Marshman, at last, still staring at the open door and the

glass lying beside it. But now he saw a khaki-clad figure pushing through the spectators to get into the room. He recognized the owner's fair hair and sturdy build.

"Why, Derek!" he said, this time leaving his post. "I never expected to see you back so soon! Why don't you keep that yourg devil under control? Needs a dog-leash to my way of thinking."

"Is he hurt?" Derek said to Mrs Marshman, who stood panting with surprise and shock beside the table, while she feebly pulled the plush tablecloth back into place.

"Where is 'e?" cried Mr Marshman, exasperated, and moving slowly towards the room.

"Graham!" Derek shouted. "Have you taken leave of your senses?"

Now, rapidly gaining the door of the shop-parlour, Mr Marshman passed inside, to share the amazement of the two already there.

When Graham, propelled by his uncontrollable feet, found himself on the inside of the ruined glass panel, his first instinct was to dive out of sight under the table. This he overdid, as has been said, for his head met the table leg with considerable force. When he was capable of movement, he crawled swiftly out of sight, emerging on the other side of the table. Here he took a quick look round, knowing that the powerful form of Mrs Marshman was close at hand, ready to inflict a punishment of suitable weight for his crime. But his cool, appraising eye was immediately caught and held; what he saw struck all thought of escape from his head, and all recollection of the rapid events of the last few minutes. For he found himself, still on his hands and knees, entranced, enthralled, staring up at Mr Marshman's fresh-water aquarium.

This was no goldfish bowl, with a solitary occupant moving sluggishly round a mazy emptiness. Mr Marshman's aquarium, standing on a heavy table, occupied the whole recess between the fireplace and the window. It was about three feet long by one foot in depth and two feet high. It was paved with fine shingle from which grew pale green stems with trailing leaves that flowed away in all directions, filling the top half of the

tank with a gently moving jungle. Two thin streams of bubbles, silver-edged, rose through the water near each end. And in and out of this exquisite setting, sometimes showing clear against the glass, sometimes mysteriously moving behind the fronds, was a multitude of small fish; some, compact brilliant inches of darting movement, others, dusky hovering forms, or fantastic banded hoops, through whose transparency blood and entrails showed a pulsing pattern; others again, large rainbow-coloured mysteries, trailing languid veils as they moved.

"Cor!" whispered Graham, half aloud to himself. "That's wizard, that is."

"Take those skates off," Derek ordered. "Unless you want me to wallop you."

Graham turned obediently to sit on the floor, undo the straps, and pull his feet out of his shoes, leaving the skates still fastened to them. He got up, with holes showing in his unwashed socks, and his feet, grey with dirt, showing through the holes. Without a word he moved up to the tank, still staring, perfectly forgetful of the immediate past.

Such a peaceful and at the same time unnatural sequel outraged Mr Marshman's sense of fitness. The boy had charged into the place, upsetting the customers, breaking a valuable pane of glass, startling the wife, and now apparently had forgotten the whole incident. Mr Marshman began to bluster; Derek backed him up with renewed scolding.

But Mrs Marshman, now that her heart had stopped pounding, was touched by the wonder in the boy's face. Having no children of her own, she held an unshakably sentimental view of them.

"Go along, Ben," she said in a wheezy voice, where laughter was never far absent. "The customers won't wait much longer. And you too, Derek. Go and get what you come for, and then you can come back in 'ere and tell me all about yourself. I'll give your young man a talking to."

So the others went back into the shop, where the buzz of conversation turned into a series of loud questions, mostly rude, and louder, ruder, answers, followed by gusts of hoarse

laughter. Mrs Marshman shut the door, drawing a little green curtain that hung above the now gaping hole in the glass panel. She took the hearth brush and shovel and gathered the splinters from the floor. Then she moved quietly over to the aquarium, where Graham still stood and stared, and reaching out her hand over his shoulder, turned a switch on the wall. A light from some hidden source glowed from above and behind, brightening the green of the plants, making the jewelled scales burn fiercely ruby and gold, turning the diaphanous fins into fairy wings.

Graham caught his breath and let it out in a long sigh of almost unbearable joy.

"Ain't it super?" he said, looking up at Mrs Marshman with a dazzled light in his blue eyes. "Wizard."

Words failed him.

Mrs Marshman put a hand on his shoulder.

"If I let you come in and see it again," she said slowly, "will you promise me not to go gallivanting into other people's doors, breaking glass and I don't know what all?"

Graham nodded. The enormity of his crime began to seep into his soul. This, the room of the aquarium, a sacred room, he had grossly violated. Supposing the tank had been just inside the door? He felt like a motorist who has narrowly missed running down a pedestrian. He had no words to express his contrition, nor his elation in having avoided the greater crime.

"Then take those skates off your shoes, and put the shoes on your feet," Mrs Marshman demanded. "Going about with nothing on, and all that glass lying there!"

"The skates is fixed," said the boy, from force of habit making the usual objection to an order. "I wear a different pair out walking."

"You do as I say," said Mrs Marshman. "You've got to walk home, haven't you? You're not going to skate out of here, and don't you think it. You do as I say, or you'll not set foot in this room again. Not ever," she added, nodding her head severely.

Graham wrenched the skates from the shoes without another word, and then pushed his feet into the latter.

"Why you boys never undo your laces beats me," said Mrs Marshman. "Just you untie them now, and tie them up-again properly. How do you expect to be able to control your actions skating if your feet are rattling about in your shoes like peas in a pod?"

Graham ventured a smile, and was rewarded with a hoarse burst of laughter, and a vigorous pat on the shoulder.

"Here, you give me one and you do the other," said Mrs Marshman. "I'll beat you at it, I shouldn't wonder."

"Bet you don't," said Graham.

The knots were hard from long straining and from wetting by rain, but he managed to get his undone first, after which he sat down on the floor to wait for Mrs Marshman. In this position Mr Marshman found the pair when, again followed by Derek, he came in from the shop.

"Waiting on 'im now, are you?" he said to his wife. "If ever there was a fool over kids, it's you, Lil."

"Mind your own business," she told him happily.

"Please, sir, wot's the big ones called?" Graham asked, looking hopefully at Mr Marshman.

"Them big fish with it all hanging round them, d'you mean, or the ones like filled-in cartwheels?"

"Them. The stripy ones."

"Angel fish," their owner said proudly. "And these are black mollies, and that one, behind that bit of weed, that's a black widow, like you'll make the missus 'ere, if you go on bringing my heart into my mouth the way you did just now."

"Stop pestering Mr Marshman," said Derek irritably. "Hadn't you better ask him what it'll cost you to put back the window?"

Graham gaped at this, but before he could say anything Mrs Marshman broke in, "We're insured for breakages in the shop, aren't we, Ben? Shall we let 'im off this time?"

"It's more'n 'e deserves," grumbled her husband.

Derek shook his young brother's shoulder.

"Can't you say thank you? Haven't you got no manners?"

"Thank you," said Graham, very subdued, though his eyes

kept turning towards the aquarium. Then, glancing up at Mrs Marshman and, surprising the tenderness that had appeared in her face, he added, "I'm sorry I bust the glass, Ma. Honest, I am."

"All right, son," said Mrs Marshman. "We'll let bygones be bygones."

"When can I come again?" the boy went on eagerly.

"To see the fish? Well, we'll have to see. You be a good boy, and behave yourself at school . . ."

"And don't play truant," said Derek.

"And don't go busting up no more doors," added Mr Marshman, "and—and we'll see," he ended, as vaguely as his wife.

It was an answer to which all children in all walks of life are accustomed, and Graham received it with the usual inward impatience and outward calm.

Mr Marshman went back to the shop to shut it up, as it was now well after closing time. But he allowed Derek to go behind the counter to make a further small purchase of sweets for Graham.

"Spoiling the little beggar," Mr Marshman grumbled, twisting the corners of the bag.

The two Howards hurried into the street.

"I've left my skates behind," the boy exclaimed at once.

"No, you haven't. I've got them."

"Give us here."

"Oh no, you don't!" Derek took a firmer grip of them. "Not again today, you don't."

"Be a sport."

"Now, look here," said Derek, stopping to put a heavy hand on Graham's shoulder. "You do what I say, see, or I'll give you a clip you'll remember."

But Graham twisted away, dodged under the hand that was still raised, and was off up the street before Derek could stop him. The latter flung a curse after the flying figure, then, smiling in spite of himself, turned towards the fish shop, where a cloud of steam issuing above the door showed that the evening's frying was in full blast.

This shop was run by a brother and sister, Miss Wicking being about thirty-five, and a few years older than her brother. They both had small thin pale faces, and a quantity of coarse, fuzzy red hair, which they both wore brushed up from their foreheads in a stiff high roll. Miss Wicking secured hers with a circular comb studded with glass brilliants, while Mr Wicking glued his with Brylcream to the exuberant growth on the top of his head. Miss Wicking, in addition, had a low roll at the nape of the neck, while her brother merely grew long ends. As they both wore white coats for their work, it was difficult, at a distance, and through the clouds of smoke and steam, to distinguish one from the other.

Derek joined the long queue just outside the door of the shop, and having after a time identified the brother Wicking, arranged to be served by him.

"Back for long?" the latter asked, lifting two large portions of skate on to the newspaper Derek handed him.

"Tomorrow night," he answered.

"Like it?"

"Might be worse. I'm at Aldershot now. It's better than up north."

"Very bleak up there, by all accounts."

"Bloody cold winds. Queer lot. Very touchy, you'd be surprised. Old-fashioned ways, too."

"Meaning the girls?"

"That's the idea."

Miss Wicking, holding a parcel in her hand, and disregarding the purchaser who kept asking her to hand it over, leaned towards Derek.

"Seen your Dad?"

The boy's face burned.

"He's living up on the Common in the prefabs. You ought to 'ave a talk with 'im. Young Graham's been running wild since 'e went off up there. You don't mind me speaking, I hope," she added genteelly, seeing the obvious storm gathering in the young man's face. Not answering her, Derek paid for his fish, bought a packet of crisps, and left the shop. The Wickings looked at one another.

"You didn't ought to 'ave spoken," said Mr Wicking. "It's a sensitive age, eighteen."

"I only did it for 'is good," Miss Wicking answered, patting her high front hair. "Who's next, please?"

Derek, walking quickly in his anger, went back up the street. Most of the children had gone indoors, but among those whose parents were not at home, or had gone to the cinema or the pub, or were merely careless of the time of day, was Graham, one borrowed skate on his right foot, executing flying turns in the empty road.

"Take that off, and come on in," said Derek. "If you want any supper."

Graham obeyed him this time. They went up the stair together.

The mess in the sitting-room looked worse than before, but Derek at once set about reducing it to order. Directing his young brother in monosyllables, he collected all the crockery and took it into the small kitchen off the landing, and stacked it in the sink. He boiled two kettles, one for the tea and one for the washing up. He had to clean sufficient plates and cups for their meal, and these he washed again when it was over. Afterwards he sent Graham to bed in the small second bedroom they had always shared.

"No, I'm not turning in yet," he told the boy. "So you can stop your badgering. You go off to sleep. I'll be there in the morning."

"Going out to the pub?" Graham asked.

"No."

"Going to see your girl-friend?"

"No."

"Going to . . . ?"

"Now look ere. Did I say bed or didn't I? And go and wash first. There's some water in the kettle. Come back and show me your neck and your feet when you've done it."

Graham's answer to this, given in a low, sulky voice, brought Derek's palm smartly against the side of his head. He gave an exaggerated yell of pain and began to cry in gusty sobs.

"It's been coming to you all the evening," said Derek. "I won't have that sort of language from you, and the quicker you learn that the better. Now stop it and take yourself off."

"You 'urt me," roared Graham, hoping to attract attention below stairs.

"You asked for it. Either you stop that row and get to bed or I'll strap you till you've got something to yell for."

Derek made a movement to unfasten his service belt, but before it was loose the rebel had fled.

After listening for a minute or two Derek lit a cigarette and went down to the front steps to smoke it. This he did partly with some idea of forestalling any move of Graham's to escape, partly for air on this hot evening.

It was growing dark now. The blurred outlines of the houses at dusk had deepened to hide their shape; the street lamps, no longer golden balloons suspended in a blue mist, had taken over the sky's function, lowering the ceiling of the street to their level, so that the people moved in a lamp-lit interior world under the roof of the night.

When he had finished his smoke, Derek went upstairs and after waiting for half an hour, reading the parts of his newspaper that had survived bringing the fish home, he went into the bedroom. Graham was in bed, asleep. He had moved himself to his accustomed side of the bed, and since there was only one pillow, had pushed it to the other side, lying flat himself. Derek noticed this piece of devotion with a pang of remorse for the clip he had given him.

"He's not a bad kid," he said to himself, looking down at the rough head and the pink curve of the childish cheek above the dirty bed coverings. In a wave of tenderness he ran his finger down the cheek, noticing the smudged dirt where the tears had dried, realizing that Graham had not attempted to wash, but repeating to himself, "Not a bad kid. Must get him out of here, though. Some place where they'll look after him proper, like at Auntie's."

Going back to the sitting-room, he put on the wireless and worked at his football pools to a background of slow waltzes for a time. Then he went to bed.

It seemed to him that many hours had passed when he heard his mother's uncertain step on the landing and her fumbling and curses as she got herself into her room. She was worse than ever, he decided, feeling nothing but contempt for her futile indulgence. His impatient turn on the mattress made Graham stir and sigh, bringing back all his anxious solicitude. He determined to seek advice whatever it cost him. He would go to Syd: he had promised to look him up, anyway. Syd always knew the answers.

Comforted by his resolve, Derek turned again and slept, this time until morning.

V

THE fried-fish shop closed at nine o'clock that evening. On most week-days it shut at eight, but on Saturday the regular family customers went to the early house at the cinema and liked to call for their supper afterwards.

When the lock was fastened and the bolts shot at the top and bottom of the door, Miss Wicking took the surplus uncooked fish to the refrigerator in the passage, while her brother shut down the sliding top of the frying troughs. After that they both set to with mops and cloths to clean up the ranges of the evening. If there was one thing that turned her stomach, Miss Wicking always said, it was the smell of stale fat mixed with fish-ends meeting her in the morning when she came down into the shop.

It was nearly ten by the time the brother and sister finished their work and could go into their back room. This was placed in a similar position to that at the newspaper shop, but it was very different in appearance from the Marshmans' parlour. Here modern unstained deal took the place of the solid mahogany of next door. The few ornaments were modern also: a green figurine of a woman wearing a wide, swirling skirt below her prominent, naked breasts; a large brown-and-white china Alsatian dog with pricked ears; and a pottery

dwarf after Walt Disney, of the type usually found decorating the rockery of a suburban garden. These stood flanking a chromium-plated square clock on the mantelpiece. A handsome television set occupied the whole of one corner of the room. A modern upholstered suite filled the rest.

While Mr Wicking turned on an electric fire and disposed himself in front of it, Miss Wicking retired into a small kitchen near at hand to collect the tray for the supper, which she had set out in readiness before the shop opened.

"I don't know how you can stand the heat of a fire," she said from the doorway of the room. "After the day we've had. I'm just about ready to melt, what with the sun all day and the business all evening."

"Doesn't do to cool off too quick," said her brother. "Where's the char?"

"The kettle won't be long coming to the boil," she answered. "The fish is warming up nicely. It was a good plump bit of 'ake you had this evening, Reg."

"It's a matter of getting the batter on proper," Reg replied. "Fill in the gaps, like. Them two bits I put on one side for you was properly filleted. We'll find meat right through."

"Glad to 'ear it. I'm all against a mouthful of bones and batter. Takes some sorting out, that one does. I sometimes wonder why we don't 'ave a 'orror of fish, always back and forward with it the way we are."

"That reminds me," said Reg Wicking without apparent relevance. "Is Harry coming up tonight?"

"Mr Biggs said tomorrow. Said he thought he'd get 'im to take his mother down to Bexhill in the car. He couldn't keep 'er out late on account of her rheumatics. So there'd be plenty of time to do our little job later."

"Nice cover-up, too. Will 'e come round here for the van same as usual?"

"That's right. Take the offal and that to the Cat's Home, then contact the boys at the depot, then back 'ere with the stuff. Mr Biggs'll bring their own car round for him later. Easy as clockwork."

"It always is. They don't bother. Got their hands full as

it is, with all this house-breaking and assault and that."

"It isn't as if it was crime," said Miss Wicking comfortably. But her brother took her up on this.

"I don't like that word suggested," he said. "It don't apply at all at our level."

"That's wot I said."

"We pay for it, don't we? And we sell it on at a reasonable profit. Private business, that's what it is. Our right and due. It'd try the patience of a saint to make head or tail of these fiddle-faddle laws they're always inventing. Best to ignore the lot."

"They 'as to do it," said Miss Wicking with gentle scorn, "or they'd put theirselves out of business, see?"

The kettle, boiling over with a hissing sound, cut short her censure of the Government and its tricky ways. In a few minutes brother and sister were seated at the table in the sitting-room, passing the vinegar bottle and the tomato ketchup to one another, while their mahogany-coloured tea filled the air with its powerful fragrance.

The Wickings slept late on Sunday, though they had indulged in none of the usual excesses the night before. Indeed, they rarely wasted their money at pubs, as they were quick to report to more convivial friends. The television, their new toy, took up a good deal of their spare time, keeping them from the cinema, too. They enjoyed telling less fortunate neighbours about this. But it was rare to find any stranger in their room when they turned the lights off and swung their deep-seated settee across the room to face the television set. All the same, they never followed the whole of the programme. The same thrift that had enabled them to buy such a machine operated now to prevent its full use. In the old days Reg Wicking would have filled money-bags with coin and kept them under his mattress. Now he had four accounts, all with different banks, and slept soft and long on a divan bed with springs.

On Sundays Miss Wicking rose at nine to put on the kettle for early morning tea. Then she called Reg and turned on the electric switch of the water-heater beside the bath. Then she

went back to bed. Her brother roused himself slowly during the next five minutes, and by the time the kettle boiled had his trousers on and his feet in a pair of old slippers. He made the tea and brought his sister a cup, retiring with his own into the bathroom, where he sipped it in the intervals of shaving. When he had finished this ritual, Miss Wicking took her weekly bath. She preferred Sunday morning to Saturday night. She was rested, for one thing, and there was daylight to see by, and no hurry to get to bed in order to save the electric light bill.

This bath and her subsequent dressing occupied the next hour of Miss Wicking's Sunday morning, at the end of which time she left her bedroom dressed in her best flowered rayon with an artificial diamond brooch of great size at her lean throat and a broad cheap paste bracelet on either wrist. Her black satin sandals had very high heels: she moved slowly and mincingly, a contrast to her swift, bird-like movements on the flat heels of every day.

Meanwhile Reg set out a loaf and butter and marmalade and cornflakes on the unswept cloth of the evening before. The teapot, newly filled and nicely brewed, was put in its place, and the Wickings sat down to their breakfast.

For them Sunday was a day reversed. The rest in bed, the dressing-up, the outing: all these took place in the morning. During these summer months they took a bus out of London to find their dinner and their weekly glass of beer beside the Thames or the boundary commons, at Hampton Court, or Richmond, or Kew. Even Windsor had seen the neat, respectable red-headed pair, walking sedately along those Castle paths open to the public, or sitting on spread mackintoshes under the great trees of the Park, nicely filled with a café's stringy beef, wet vegetables and synthetic fruit pie. They would travel home again in the late afternoon, and by six o'clock Mabel was back in her old house overall and sandshoes, making the beds, while Reg, in dungerees, went over the machinery of his trade.

It was in this guise that Harry Biggs found them when he arrived at seven.

"Is your Dad coming in?" Reg called to him from the shop, hearing his sister at the house door.

"No. He's taking the car back. Mum didn't want to go to Bexhill, or else she wouldn't go. It takes her that way when 'er rheumatism's bad. So Dad don't like to leave her for too long. Shall I see to this lot straight away?"

"Two barrels it is for the 'Ome," Reg said, going to the inner doorway of the shop. "I'll give you a hand."

"Like me to open the gate?" Mabel asked.

She rather enjoyed the humour of these excursions. People in the road would ask her why they were working on Sunday and she could say it wasn't exactly work, it was charity, because the Cat's Home got the offal free and for nothing.

"In memory of my old Tibby," she always told inquirers. "Blue Persian. Just like a child. Understood every word you spoke to 'im."

The joke was it was all true; right up to leaving the Home after dumping the stuff. After that it was nobody's business. And the best of all was nobody knew, except of course the lucky ones.

She stood at the gate of the little yard, watching the van drive down the road, the sunset glow on its battered paint. Reg came out to her.

"Anything up?"

"No. Why should there be?"

"Only wondered."

"Did you remember to put the sacks in?"

"Wot d'you take me for?"

The two red heads, flaming in the sunset, craned forward to watch the last of the van at the turn of the road, then retreated, and the gate was shut and barred.

Before the war this yard of theirs had been a garage, the only one in the row of shops, and first built, though the Wickings did not know it, as a stable to house a milkcart and its pony. Their fish shop had been a dairy in the old days, then a grocer's shop, when the stable was used as a storehouse. Later on it was made into a garage for the delivery van of the branch laundry that occupied the premises. For all the middle

years of the war the shop was empty: for the last eighteen months it was derelict, wrecked by a mass of blazing timber from a nearby house, which fell on the roof and slithering off, lodged in the narrow passage between shop and garage, burning the latter to the ground.

Then the Wickings came, with a war gratuity and some savings from munition work, and they cleared away the remains of the garage, substituting a lean-to shed under which their van was sheltered from the worst of the weather. Beyond this rickety structure they had contrived a square brick extension of the wall of the shop. This ill-ventilated, cement-floored hovel was the storehouse for the fish, which was stacked on the floor in the boxes it came in. The refrigerator indoors was used only for keeping uncooked material overnight. Reg brought the stuff home packed in ice, so it was good for twenty-four hours, he always said.

A chipped sink, with a cold tap above and a tiled slab at the side, served for washing and cutting the prospective food, while a series of blood-stained tubs stood close by to receive the offal. In cold weather, assisted by the remains of the ice it came in, this offal remained more or less fresh until the end of the week. But in the summer, whenever the door was opened, a black mat of flies rose from each tub, the laying and gorging disturbed, to whizz madly about the confined space and then dart into the air, followed by a smell so putrid and so pungent that the neighbours were always on the brink of lodging a complaint, but never quite did so, for fear the shop would move away, and they would have to go further for their supper.

Miss Wicking kicked shut the door of this larder as she passed it.

"We ought to get another frig," she remarked for the hundredth time that month.

"Since when 'ave we come into a fortune?"

She sighed. Reg was a good worker, she'd give him that. Brought all his fish up from the market himself; went in for all the latest substitutes in mixing the batter. But no ambition: not what she'd call ambition.

"You've no cause to complain," Reg reminded her. "This is a good little business, good and steady. You've no call to run it down."

"I'm not running it down. I'm suggesting improvements. You've no objection to that, I suppose?"

"Might as well order yourself the crown jewels as a store frig. About as likely to get it, too, apart from the price. They all goes to 'orspitals."

She sighed again.

"That's the Welfare State all over. Fat lot of welfare when a decent business can't get the necessary. I expect you're right. I'll get a cup of tea. Waiting for Harry to get back always makes me jittery. It's the suspense, shouldn't wonder."

"Suspense be blowed. It's a piece of cake."

"I hope you're right, I'm sure."

They both looked up at the sky as they went in through the back door of the house. A big cloud stood high in the east, threatening the dying sun. Black fingers of cloud reached across the sky; below and between them the yellow of the sunset was livid.

"Looks like a storm," Miss Wicking said. "Wot's the betting Harry gets caught in it?"

"It's not Harry I'm worried over," answered Reg. "It's the others. They mayn't like to turn out if there's thunder and lightning, which it looks like. I don't want to have the stuff on our hands again tomorrow."

"They'll come all right. Don't you worry your head over that. Once Harry gets the van back safe and sound we've nothing to worry over."

"I wish I could agree," said Reg gloomily, pushing the door close, to shut out the lowering sky.

"There's thunder in the air," said Mrs Marshman to her husband. "Look at the fish."

The general appearance of the aquarium was quite unchanged. Its weeds waved as leisurely as ever, the bright bubbles quivered up to the surface from the air-pipes, no faster and no slower than their regulating mechanism allowed.

Perhaps more of the inhabitants than usual swam up to the surface to open and shut their flabby mouths there, but Sunday morning was one of the two weekly feeding days, and there was still plenty of fresh food floating in the upper levels of the water. Mrs Marshman's observation was founded on more subtle considerations than these.

"No doubt you're right," agreed her husband. "Though I can't say I see it myself."

"It's the way they look," replied his wife. "They know all right. Proper old-fashioned, I call them."

Mr Marshman sucked at his pipe, tucking his thumbs into his unbuttoned waistcoat, which he wore loose over a collarless shirt. He stared at the aquarium.

"No doubt you're right," he repeated, then roused himself to add, "Young Derek was in again this morning."

"With the boy?"

"Ah. Wanted to look at the fish again. I told 'im 'e'd 'ave to work 'is passage. Wait till the end of the week. Can't have that young devil always on our doorstep."

"He's not a bad kid," said Mrs Marshman, regretfully.

"Bad blood," muttered her husband. "Mother who's never what you can call dead sober, and father on the loose. Stands to reason 'e takes after one or other of them."

"Well, I call that a wicked thing to say!" exclaimed Mrs Marshman. "Isn't Derek their flesh and blood too? You couldn't find a nicer boy than that young Derek, not if you searched everywhere."

"He's all right, I suppose. If the Army don't spoil 'im. Pity he 'ad to go, in a way. He was making out very well at Pratt's."

"The Army won't do him no harm. He's more upset over the goings-on here. Did he say if he'd seen his father?"

"No. It seems those Wickings told him it was a prefab on the Common. I 'ad to tell 'im I never get a sight of Alf Howard myself these days."

"Ashamed to put his nose inside respectable houses. Going off with that woman."

"You can't altogether blame him. He stood Maudie for

over twenty years. It got him down after Derek's call-up."

"Poor kid. He didn't want to go and that's a fact. Told me if they thought of sending 'im foreign, 'e'd desert. Graham means a sight more to 'im than his father and mother combined."

"Which is't surprising," said Mr Marshman, reaching for the paper twist of tobacco in his waistcoat pocket.

"They can feel the storm coming on, all right," said Mrs Marshman. "Just look at them now."

The fish, to which she referred, still placidly moving about their small but luxurious quarters, manifested no change of mien nor any fresh activity. They still goggled near the glass: some moved vertically up and down its surface using a mysterious rotation of their fins, like helicopters in a fluid air; some bent themselves between the long fronds of the weed, stopping for no apparent reason, with a delicate gauze tail the single lazy sign of their presence.

"You and your blessed old fish," said Mr Marshman. But he felt in his trouser pocket for a handkerchief to mop the bald surface of his head before remarking, "Shouldn't wonder if you're right, the both of you. It's close enough for it, in all conscience."

VI

SYD WILLIAMS and his family lived in a small, dark, old-fashioned house in a narrow street not far from the great raised tracks of the Southern Region's railroad. The street consisted of two rows of exactly similar houses, facing one another: a front door, a window, a front door, a window, all the way along: door facing door across the way, and window opposite window; odd numbers on one side, even on the other. The Williamses lived at Fourteen.

Derek, with Graham, uncomfortable in a grey flannel suit, arrived at the house about eleven on Sunday morning. Syd opened the door; he was wearing a pair of old Army trousers, a khaki shirt, and a pullover, and did not seem to be too hot,

in spite of the summer warmth of the day. Derek noticed at once that his features, always thin, were sharper than ever, and very pale. But he merely grinned, confident of a welcome.

"Well, you're the last one I expected," said Syd with his pleasant smile. "And the nipper, too. Forty-eight hours, is it?"

"That's right."

"Come on in. Jean!" he called to his wife. "It's young Derek."

A muffled voice came from the scullery, beyond the kitchen, whose door stood open at the end of a narrow hall passage, which skirted a short, steep staircase.

"Come on in," Syd repeated. "You too," he added, as Graham hung back. "You'll find our Marie up the yard, building a new bit to 'er rock garden."

He put a hand on Graham's shoulder to lead him across the kitchen to the door of the scullery, which opened into a little back garden.

"Here, leave your jacket," said Derek, "if you're going to muck about outdoors."

"He can have this old pair of Syd's overalls," said Jean, coming forward from the sink to wipe her hands on the towel that hung from a hook on the door. "That'll save 'is clothes."

Graham, smiling sheepishly, allowed her to muffle him in the foreman's blue jeans. He was a tall child for his age, so as Syd was slightly built, the boiler suit was not very much too long, though it hung in folds round the boy's thin middle.

"Sit down, Derek," Syd told him. "Tell us about yourself."

Derek moved to a chair under the window, but as he did so he became aware of an old woman, whom he had not noticed before, because she was tucked away at the side of the kitchen range, half hidden by the fireside recess and the high arm of an old-fashioned horsehair sofa. He remained standing, looking awkwardly in her direction. Syd saw his predicament.

"Jean's mother lives with us now," he explained. "Ma, this is Derek Howard, you've 'eard me speak of. From Pratt's."

"Pleased to meet you, young man," said the old woman in a deep voice, turning her eyes from the grate just long enough to give a polite substance to her words.

Derek muttered the same phrase, but as she was by now no longer looking at him, he said no more, and sat down heavily on the chair he had chosen. The window was open near him, but even so the little room was stiflingly hot, for the fire in the range was burning. On the old lady's account, he supposed, as he knew that Jean had a gas-stove in the scullery for her cooking.

"Well, how's the Army putting up with you?" Syd demanded.

"I get by," Derek answered. "How's Pratt's?"

"Much as usual. We're short-'anded on account of the boys' holidays."

"You going soon?"

"No," said Jean Williams, resting her hands on the table as she began to speak. "No, we don't go soon. Syd says the others ought to get away first, so we wait for our lot till September. September! I ask you! You know the kind of weather we'll likely get then. And all this lovely sunshine the last three weeks going to waste."

Syd laughed.

"It's not wasted. You should hear the ones that've come back. 'Ad no end of a time."

"Wasted for us," said his wife, determined to concede nothing to his unselfishness. "He's booked us up with a private 'otel at Bognor. Marie's wild to go. But September. What a time to choose! And it's our first real holiday since the war. Marie wasn't old enough till this year. I don't care for taking young children all that way on a crowded train. Takes all the pleasure out of it at the start, what with them fretting and that. It do seem a shame to 'ave to wait all those weeks for it."

"Better late than never," said Syd, laughing again. "Suppose I 'adn't come back from the war at all."

"Don't you dare say such a wicked thing," his wife protested, putting a hand on his arm. He patted her shoulder affectionately, but she would not be mollified.

"You've no right to talk that way. You came near enough to it in those blessed old Commando raids. You've no right to make a joke of it now. It's tempting Providence."

"'E's not been well of late," said old Mrs Hope from beside the fireplace, breaking into the conversation without warning. "Off 'is feed. You can see 'e's lost weight, only 'e's too darned obstinate to get it took."

"I thought you looked a bit on the thin side as I come in," said Derek anxiously.

"Now then, don't you make another. They're on to me from morning to night to see my doctor."

"Off 'is feed," repeated Mrs Hope. "When a man don't eat, there's a cause for it, you may be certain."

"Just a spot of indigestion," said Syd. "The hot weather, I put it down to."

"You ought to have a proper over'aul," argued his wife. "Go up to the doctor's."

"Wait two bloody hours in a crowded waiting-room for a packet of bicarb. I can get in a chemist's in two minutes. Not me!"

"He might send you up for a X-ray."

"Wot good would that do? I can't go taking time off while the boys are on holiday."

"If you'd taken your holiday first, as you were entitled to, in your position, you'd maybe not be getting the indigestion any more."

Syd waved his hands, distracted, but still laughing.

"Pipe down, girl, for Pete's sake! Let's hear wot Derek does in the Army. Come across, mate. Give us the gen on the latest way of beating up a recruit."

Derek did as he was asked, haltingly at first, but, as he warmed to the task, with more fluency and a careful deliberate regard for fact that evidently pleased Syd, for he applauded at the end of it.

"Then it might be worse, eh?" he said with his open affectionate smile. "Not so browned off as you'd like to make out?"

"Not really."

"Wot's up, then?"

Derek hesitated, then, seeing that Jean had gone back to her scullery, and old Mrs Hope had long since stopped follow-

ing the conversation, he made an effort to unburden himself.

"It's Graham. My Dad's hopped it, and you know wot Mum's like."

"Yes."

"The kid's running wild. I saw it my last leave. Now it's worse. He looks all right; she gives 'im enough to eat and that. But up to all hours, and seeing 'er like she comes home every night. Stands to reason 'e talks back and cheeks everyone. He never did in the war when he was down at Auntie's."

He paused, looking out of the window into the narrow yard at the end of which, below a sloping rockery, a tiny square of grass was nearly blotted out by the crouching figures of Graham and little Marie Williams.

"He's right enough in proper company," Derek went on. "Look at 'im, now. Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Last night I nearly took a strap to 'im."

He recited the list of Graham's iniquities, at which Syd laughed aloud.

"Boys will be boys," he said. "You're making too much of it."

Then, seeing a hurt look on Derek's face, he went on gently, "Don't start worrying, son. He's a long way yet from getting into serious trouble."

"I don't know so much," Derek burst out. "Kid need someone in charge. Judging from the papers, you'd think the youngsters was only waiting their chance to turn the whole bloody world upside down. It gets me down not being able to do a darned thing about it. Miles away—thinking wot 'e might be up to. Boxed up in the Army."

"I shouldn't worry," said Syd again. "You go and get yourself married when you're through with it. That's the answer. Marry a good kid like my Jean, and have Graham to live with you."

"Two years," grumbled Derek. "Hell of a lot can happen in two years."

"Or it can't. Still going with the same girl?"

"That's right. Netta."

"Be seeing 'er today?"

"I ought to. I wrote to say I'd be round. I don't know if I ought to leave Graham."

"You'll have to leave 'im tonight. Can't make much difference."

"It's a fair knockout," said Derek bitterly.

The two men exchanged cigarettes in silence, and remained silent, standing near the window. Jean Williams looked in at them from the scullery door.

"Why don't you two take the kids up to the Common?" she suggested. "Then I can get on with my dinner."

"O.K.," Syd agreed.

Jean went outside the back door to call her daughter, who came running when she heard why she was wanted.

"Now, Graham, you wash your hands in this basin, and I'll take Marie upstairs and get her ready. I won't be a jiffy."

She filled a jug quickly with hot water from the gas-heater beside the sink, and taking Marie under her arm climbed the short, steep stairs to the front bedroom.

"We're down for a Council house," Syd remarked as he watched this ritual set in train. "You want a bathroom with kids."

"Any chance of getting one?"

"There's only about two thousand ahead of us on points," he replied with his short laugh.

Presently Marie was produced, pink and breathless from her rapid change, in a clean shiny silk dress and little blue top coat, white socks and white sandals.

Meanwhile Syd also disappeared upstairs to struggle into a dark blue suit, clean shirt, collar and tie. Derek got his young brother back into his jacket. The four of them then left the house, adapting their pace to Marie's small steps, and moving towards the nearest bus-stop in the main road.

"I don't want to go on the Common here," said Derek as they reached it. "Dad's somewhere up this way. I don't want to run into 'im. We could go to Putney. It's a bit further, but it's more open, like."

"I don't mind."

The bus held several other fathers with their children,

similarly banished while the Sunday dinner was preparing. At the top of West Hill nearly all the passengers got down, making in every direction for Putney Heath or Wimbledon Common.

Syd and Derek strolled along, discussing affairs at the garage, while ahead of them the children ran in circles, shouting and laughing.

Graham had felt a certain contempt for his young companion as he watched her play in the yard at her home. He did not want to join in her babyish game with the rockery, feeling it beneath his dignity, and at the same time unwilling to encroach on anyone, however young, in her own territory. But out on the Common he was able to take the lead, and did so with an unexpectedly gentle regard for the little girl's age and capacity. He hid from her behind bushes, allowing himself to be found and caught. He carried her over rough ground on his back. He also pointed out interesting plants and stones to her, inventing reasons for their importance. Marie, with only nursery-school experience of other children, was delighted with all this attention from such a big boy. She began to order him about, and while her imperious demands grew, Graham obligingly strove to fulfil them, until her father put his foot down.

"No, you can't ride Graham's back again, see?" he told her, catching her by the hand. "Just walk along proper for a bit."

"I want to ride," Marie wailed.

"I don't mind," said Graham. "She's ever so light."

Marie pulled away from her father, scrambled up the obliging back crouched near her, and the two went off again, Graham bent nearly double under the load, red-faced and sweating from such exertion in the summer sun. No one suggested he should take off his jacket. A Sunday suit was a Sunday suit, and it had to be worn complete, out of doors, whatever the weather.

But when, rounding a clump of silver birches on the Common, the children came upon a little pond Sunday observance was overwhelmed. Graham lowered Marie from his back, tore off his jacket, shoes and stockings, and rolling up his shorts, waded into the water.

"Me too," said Marie firmly. She had been to the sea for a day's outing the previous summer; she knew the drill for paddling. Her own sandals and socks were soon discarded. She bundled her dress inside her knickers, and joined Graham on the fringe of the water.

"You better stay there," he told her. "It gets deep further out."

"Wot you lookin' for?" Marie demanded.

"Fish," the boy answered. "You got to move slowly to see 'em. Don't scuff up the water that way. It makes it muddy. And it scares 'em off."

"Is there fish in 'ere?"

"I dunno. 'Spect so. You do like I said."

"It's muddy any'ow," said Marie, stirring the bottom with her fat little toes. "I wouldn't be a fish in this 'ere, not for much, I wouldn't."

"Some of them lives in mud or sand," explained Graham. "Flat fish and that. I read it in a book."

"Can you read?"

"'Course I can read. I could read when I was six."

"I'll be six come Christmas," said Marie importantly.

She left the water to wander along the edge of the pond, and was still doing this when the two men found them.

"Who told you to paddle?" asked her father. "I'll be in trouble if I take you home dirty."

Marie gave a little chuckle, and running back into the pond, began to scoop up water in her hands and toss it in all directions.

"Give over," said Graham, moving towards her. "That went in my eye."

"Bring her out," Derek suggested. "We ought to be getting back. It's your fault if she's wet. You never ought to 'ave gone in yourself."

"They're all right," Syd reassured him.

The party, re-clothed and turned towards home, went along sedately enough, the children a few yards ahead.

"It's time Marie had someone to play with," Syd said. "If things was a bit more settled."

Derek nodded.

"That's wot Graham needs, really. Can't be helped, though. There was a girl between 'im and me, but she died of diphtheria. Before these immunizations, that was. I never 'ad them till I went in the Army, but Graham was done at the Clinic at Stan&ord. Auntie saw to it."

"Pity he couldn't 'ave gone back there," Syd said thoughtfully. "He's not a bad kid. Look at the way 'e's been this morning with Marie. Nothing could've been nicer."

"He's all right in the right company," Derek agreed.

"They mostly are," Syd added.

Derek was silent in the bus going back to Farrar Street. He got up from his place two stops before Syd expected to get down. He leaned forward to shout to his friend above the noise of the traffic.

"Me and Graham might as well get off here."

"Cut it out. You're coming back to dinner."

"On this ration? Not likely."

"That's all right. Our butcher's not 'ard on us. I don't eat much meat these days, myself."

Derek knew that his friend referred to his vague and undiagnosed illness, and something in his manner and appearance struck a sudden chill to his heart. Syd's face in the shadow of the bus's interior had a pinched, grey look he had not noticed in the sun. His mouth was drawn down, and his eyes were weary. It was evident that the morning's stroll had tired him considerably, and that, Derek thought, was bad, when they had been no distance at all. Partly from his wish to speak to Jean again, and partly from a reluctance to leave his friend, he agreed to accept the invitation.

Graham was delighted. Sunday dinner at home was often a matter of bread and marge and fish paste. So he was careful to help little Marie off the bus when they all finally got down, and to hold her hand crossing the road. If, when they went indoors, their hands were dirty and their clothes a bit dishevelled, their pink cheeks and shining eyes recommended their outing. Jean was delighted with them. She had already laid places for two visitors, which fact delivered Derek's mind

of its last qualms. While Syd, who denied his obvious exhaustion, went to collect a jug of beer from the off-licence, Derek voiced his newly found anxiety.

"He's that obstinate," Jean replied. "Won't go near the doctor in case he puts him off for a week or two, which'd keep one of the others back in his place. That shows he knows in himself it isn't imagination. I wouldn't be surprised if 'e'd picked up some germ out East in the war. But it's no good. The more I'm on to 'im, the more stubborn 'e gets. He'll wait till after the holidays, when it won't matter to the men if 'e's not there. Unless 'e drops first. Sometimes I almost wish he would, from the pain 'e gets of an evening. Indigestion can't be the whole story, not by a long chalk."

Derek and Graham went back to Vincent Street in the early afternoon. Here the former re-made the small bundle of his possessions. He was not coming back after his visit to Netta Smith, but would start out for Aldershot from her home.

Graham, changed back into his dirty shirt and shorts, his Sunday suit laid by, watched his brother prepare to leave. The boy did not complain or grieve openly, but his solemn face and his unnatural silence went to Derek's heart.

"So long, kid," he said at the door. "Be seeing you."

He strode away, not looking back, the hot tears pricking his eyelids. Graham, who was by now sitting on the doorstep, fixing his skates, did not look up to watch him go. But when he rose to his feet and found the khaki-clad figure had already disappeared, he charged yelling across the street, to break up with blows and shouts and bravado the first group of children that stood in his path.

VII

A SENSE of urgency, which had slackened that morning when he was with his friends, drew tight again in Derek's mind as he made his way to Netta Smith's home, between Putney and Wimbledon. He arrived there so full of his problem

how best to improve Graham's dangerous circumstances, and, at the same time, so conscious that it was not a subject likely to interest the Smith family in the smallest degree, that he appeared to the parents of his girl-friend more "dim" and "wet" than ever before.

The Smiths lived in a new Council house on an estate that was still being developed. Their house was among the older nine or ten there. That is to say, it and its immediate fellows had been in existence three years, and the Council's substitute for front gardens, green verges with small bush plants or flowering trees, was pleasantly established along the whole group. Further away half-built houses rose out of rough ground, with the builder's shack prominent beside an already laid road. In the distance, heaps of bricks in a cleared space showed where the estate was to spread.

Netta went to the door in response to Derek's knock. He did not kiss her because he could see Mrs Smith peering out at him from the wide window of the front room.

"Oh, it's you," said Netta. "I wondered if it was this week or next. You didn't say, did you?"

Derek could not remember what he had put on his postcard. Writing was an effort, composition a worse one. The fingers that were beginning to learn precise skill with a spanner, wielding it from all sorts of awkward and uncomfortable positions, were helpless in moving a pen across paper. Similarly, a mind neat and accurate in deciding how to fit parts into their proper places, and quick to understand the right sequence of movement in a mechanism, had no power to describe events or ideas. He wrote the usual things, the conventional platitudes. It was quite beyond him to break from these into an attempt to convey information.

"I said I was due for leave," Derek protested.

"But you didn't say when, silly boy," the girl laughed. "Never mind, we're all on our own, no guests expected. Dad said it was too sultry to go out, and the roads'd be awful on a Sunday for the car. Come on into the lounge."

Derek's fleeting hope, that she meant they were to be alone in the house, was extinguished when he remembered Mrs

Smith's face at the window. So he followed Netta into the sitting-room, wondering how soon he could suggest a walk up to the Common.

"Well, you are a stranger," said Mrs Smith, rising to shake hands with him.

She was a woman of over fifty, with grey hair tightly waved, a heavy, congested face, and a shapeless figure, draped, for this summer Sunday afternoon, in startling floral rayon, where red and black predominated. She turned from Derek to her husband.

"Father, here's Derek Howard. Quite a stranger, I tell him."

Mr Smith lowered his Sunday newspaper to greet Derek, and then raised it again to hide his face. He was a thin man with spectacles and a bald forehead. He was not ugly: indeed, his narrow features were well proportioned, and he would have been handsome with more flesh on his bones. It was easy to see where Netta had got her straight nose and finely modelled chin and slight figure. The florid Mrs Smith looked out of keeping beside father and daughter.

"Pleased to meet you," said Derek, for Mr Smith's glance had been so unrecognizing and impersonal that he felt he was being introduced for the first time.

Netta burst out laughing.

"You know Derek, Father," she cried in a shrill voice. "It's the uniform."

Mr Smith laid his paper aside. He saw there was no escape from unwanted sociability. But his wife came to his rescue.

"Make yourself at home, Derek," she said, moving graciously to one end of the settee, and waving him to the other. "Do you smoke? Netta, turn off that wireless."

The blare of dance music had overlaid to some extent Derek's waning confidence and distracted thoughts. In the silence that followed the click of the switch he lowered himself miserably into the corner of the settee, looking round for the girl. But she had chosen the moment to disappear.

"Gone to doll herself up," said Mrs Smith. "You'll be taking her out, I suppose?"

"Yes. Er—yes. I'd like to."

"What else would he come for?" said Mr Smith suddenly. He took up his paper again, and shot at Derek from behind this barrier, "Forty-eight hours, eh?"

The young man started violently.

"Er—yeah—forty-eight. Back tonight."

He moved forward to the edge of his seat, balancing there with his hands between his knees, not daring to look about him.

It was all worse than ever, he thought. Mr Smith must be doing well. He was connected with the upholstery trade: Derek was not very sure in his own mind what precisely that meant, and he had never liked to ask Netta for exact information. But he had never failed to discover some fresh addition to the house, a better wireless, a new satin-covered cushion, a fluted lamp-shade, an elaborate embossed china ornament, a new and shinier fringed runner for the table. These accumulating signs of wealth and well-being oppressed him, remembering his own home. He felt he was slipping further and further behind in the new social race founded upon material prosperity. He was ashamed of his inclination to despise what he saw. Refinement ought to be respected and admired. And there was no question the Smiths were refined. You could hear it in the way they spoke. But their prosperity weighed him down.

He tried to think it was partly Netta's doing. Living at home the way she did, naturally that helped. She was getting good money as a typist; with her wages, or the best part of them, added to her father's earnings, Mrs Smith would have ample for the housekeeping and for these improvements into the bargain.

"Father's thinking of television," Mrs Smith said, apparently following his thoughts. "You'll have seen the aerial next door. We've been asked in once or twice. We're very taken with it."

"The sporting events are the best," said Mr Smith, lowering his paper again to correct his wife's enthusiasm. "I like a bit of sport myself."

His usual summary of television performance was interrupted by Netta before it was well under way. But in any case Derek was too entranced by the girl's appearance to have heard it. In her fresh pink-and-white dress, white sandals, and white lace gloves, with a collar of white plastic daisies round her slender neck and white daisy clips on the lobes of her small ears, his girl was once more the fairy he had fallen in love with nine months ago, when she was still working at Pratt's garage as a junior clerk in the office, and he had dared to ask her to go with him to a film.

"Why don't you wear your pearls?" said her mother, looking her up and down with critical admiration.

"Too heavy," answered Netta.

Her pale gold hair fell over her eyes; she moved self-consciously across the room to look at herself in the glass of one of the pictures. Just like *Vogue*, she thought, putting up one finger to lift the silken lock a little.

"You'd better wear your gloves. I see you haven't done your hands."

"Derek doesn't like red nails."

Mrs Smith smiled tolerantly, glancing at her own work-soiled and weather-beaten fingers, with their split, smeared scarlet talons.

When the young couple had gone she turned to her husband.

"Can you see what Netta finds in that boy?" she demanded.

"A lump of muscle and a mouth to kiss her with," replied Mr Smith.

"I don't know why you have to be so coarse about your only child. It's a mercy she can't hear you."

"Are they coming in to tea?" he asked. He seldom allowed himself to argue with his wife.

"How do I know? Netta's old enough to be out of leading strings."

"I didn't ask on that account."

"Why did you, then?"

"I promised to look up Charlie Bentham this evening. I wanted to know when I was likely to get away."

"Oh, I see. Well, they didn't say, did they?"

"Get it on for five-thirty. That gives them a couple of hours. If they aren't back then, we needn't expect them."

Derek's second visit to the Common that day held none of the pleasant unself-conscious enjoyment of his morning stroll with Syd Williams. Then he had been able to talk about all those things he understood; the essential pattern of his mind had been satisfied; the conversation had reviewed all the known advances in motor-car construction, all the new gadgets, all the comparative performance of new cars, and besides, all the local gossip at Pratt's garage. With Netta this was out: girls never wanted to hear about cars, and would not understand anything he had to tell them. He felt as awkward and as clumsy as he had done the day before with Marion Trent. More so, indeed, because behind the new Marion was a person, a remembered friend, an equal, taken for granted. But behind the picture of the external Netta there was nothing but sex, its terrors and desires and prohibitions. He was proud to have her walking beside him, and frightened out of his life at the unknown quality of her thoughts.

They said very little until they reached the Common. Then Netta broke the silence.

"You do look hot," she said pityingly. "Why don't we find a place in the shade?"

Derek was grateful for this sympathetic lead. When they had found a suitable retreat he stripped off his battledress top and spread it on the ground for Netta to sit on. He lay full length beside her, waiting to cool off before he kissed her. This was necessary with Netta; once she had objected to his smelling of sweat; you could get things to stop it, she said. That was all right for a girl. They drowned themselves in perfume, anyway. But he wasn't going to feel a cissy, going into a chemist's shop for that sort of thing for himself.

He waited, lying on his side, enjoying his view, from so close, of Netta's legs stretched out in front of her, and her slender arms propping her up. She was unbelievably fragile. Tiny wrists and ankles, a little thin neck that only the smooth young skin prevented from being scraggy, small, immature

breasts scarcely swelling the line of her dress. In her face and hair too, the prettiness was a matter of delicacy, of youth, of the colours of early spring, the yellow of primroses, the ice-blue of March skies, the pink and white of the flowering cherry. She stirred him profoundly. In his mind she was the essence of all his favourite film-stars rolled into one; in his heart she was the embodiment of a deeply remembered countryside.

All over the Common couples were stretched in the shade of bushes and under the silver birches, performing the limited ritual of conventional unmarried love-making. Some of them would stay on until darkness fell to cover their extended activities. For them the burning hours of waiting would bring their reward. For the rest it bred confusion, ill-temper, or perhaps, by shared frustration, a drawing together in denial, an assuagement of loneliness possible only to puritan spirits, a smug satisfaction in observing *all* the rules.

An hour of Derek's kisses, his heavy arm across her body, his heavier head on her shoulder, his rough hair against her neck, was quite as much as Netta could stand. At the end of it she pushed him away and sat up, pulling her dress into place.

"Gosh, it isn't 'alf 'ot," she said, forgetting for once to use her genteel office voice.

Derek was used to her apparently inconsequent change of mood. Being himself preoccupied with discovering his own powers, he had not yet learned how remote she was at all times from any real feeling. He took her remark at its face value.

"Working up for a storm, shouldn't wonder," he answered, rolling on to his back and putting his hands behind his head. His obsession, never absent from him for long, was brought back now by the thought of violent weather.

"Wish I didn't 'ave to go off tonight," he grumbled.

"Afraid of getting wet?"

"It's Graham. I don't like leaving 'im."

He longed to talk to her about his mother's hopeless drift, his father's desertion, but he did not know how to begin. He had hinted from time to time that all was not well at his home, and that his mother was the cause of the trouble, but

he had never been definite. The Smith home, that perfection of prosperity, always daunted him. Nevertheless, he was shocked by Netta's careless rejoinder.

"Who's Graham?"

"My kid brother. Did you forget?"

She yawned, not bothering to cover her mouth. Derek noticed for the first time that some of her little teeth were decayed, and that there were many gaps between them. She said lazily, "Father wants to take us to Torquay in August to one of the big hotels."

"Is it his own business?"

"Is what his own business?"

"This upholstery. That's what he does, isn't it?"

She laughed.

"His own business! I call that rich! I do really. No, of course not. He's better off where he is. He's at the top of the repairs department on the second-hand side."

She named a big London furnishing house.

"West End, all of it. Dad runs it. I mean he's in charge of all the actual work, mending chairs and that, new springs, new covers. Everything you have to do to the big suites, mattresses, and divans and that. I don't know exactly."

"I know darned well what happens when they're left," said Derek, with a short laugh. "The stuffing falls out and the bottom lays on the floor."

"I really wouldn't know. Mum'd never let our things get to such a pitch. Not with Father about. He'd 'ave a word to say."

Derek chewed a grass dreamily.

"Wish we was older. Wish I was over twenty-one and shut of the Army."

"Why?"

"So we could get married and have a home of our own."

"Would you be earning enough by the time you're twenty-one? It's expensive starting a home, even if we could get a house."

"We could find rooms to start with or . . ."

"I'd hate rooms. And I don't think Father would let us

stop with them. I'd rather wait till we could afford a real home of our own."

"Better not wait too long."

"Father waited till he was thirty-two. Mum's a year or two older than him. She never gives her age exact."

That accounts for her manner, Derek thought. Tries to pass herself off as the junior, and knows bloody well she can't.

"Cor! I'll never wait all that time. Wasting the best years of our lives. Besides, I plan to 'ave the nipper with us."

"Who?"

"Graham, and for Pete's sake don't ask who Graham is, because I told you not two minutes since."

"All right, all right! You needn't fly off the handle. I never said anything."

"You looked."

"I can look anyway I like, Derek Howard. And you needn't think you'll have that young brother of yours living in my house, or Mum's house, or anywhere else. I hate children, I tell you, I hate them."

Derek jerked into a sitting position. Netta's face was peaked and ugly: it was quite obvious that she meant what she said.

"You can't mean that. It's—it's unnatural."

"No, it isn't. It's common sense."

"But—but we've often said if we ever get married we'll 'ave a big family. Well, three or four."

"You said it. I never."

"D'you mean you don't want kids at all? Not any?"

"One p'raps. Mum says it keeps a man in the home."

"Was that the only reason she had you?"

"Don't be so coarse!"

"I wasn't. Honest, Netta, you were only kidding, weren't you?"

"Me kidding? Not much. A lot of squalling, dirty brats, all that washing, tied to the house till they're old enough to be left, messing up the place so you can never have it looking nice! No, thank you."

"It isn't like that. It needn't be. Syd's place looks fine."

"How many has he got?"

"One, so far. He was away in the war."

"They've had time since. I bet they don't want another."

"They do. He told me so."

"Well, I don't, see? And I'd prefer not to discuss the subject. It isn't as if we was engaged, nor likely to be. We're too young to think of such a thing."

It was impossible to tell her he would not have thought of it except in relation to Graham's need. He lay down again, still chewing his piece of grass. And presently Netta, bored with his immobility, turned to him to pull it out of his mouth. A little later she allowed herself to be drawn close, to submit to his shy, adolescent fondling. She was neither roused nor touched by the contact, but it satisfied her pride, her desire for conventional conquest. She had a boy, he behaved very nicely, observing the rules as they were played in her social group. She wanted no more than this; to hold her place among her friends and to establish ascendancy over the mother, whom, in common with her father, she both relied upon and detested.

The sky was overcast when Derek and Netta left the Common. He used its threatening appearance as an excuse for not going back with her to tea. He had to hitch down to Aldershot that night, he reminded her, and cars were not so frequent leaving London on Sunday evening as returning there. If a storm came on he'd have had it, and it was no joke in any case standing out in the road after dark trying to thumb cars that only blinded you with their headlights as they left you cold.

Mr Smith expressed approval of the boy's decision, but Mrs Smith was disappointed that she had not been able to impress him with her preparations for the meal.

"Waste of good salad," she said, when they were settled round the table. "Not to speak of the ham."

"Ham again?" exclaimed her husband. "Two and six a quarter every time!"

"In the shops," Mrs Smith reminded him. "But this is that tin Charlie got for you wholesale."

"Good old Charlie," said Mr Smith. "How's the time

going on, Mother? I promised him seven-thirty at the latest."

At half-past seven precisely Mr Smith pushed his way into the saloon bar at 'The Bear and Pole.' Charlie Bentham, sucking beer off his drooping moustache, was talking to Mrs Biggs.

"Evening," said Mr Smith to the pair of them. "The usual, if you please."

Mrs Biggs poured it for him herself. She explained that Peggy, the younger barmaid, was helping Maud Howard in the public bar.

"I don't know what you think, but I can hardly see the rim of the glass," she added. "Gets darker every minute. We'll be needing the lights up if it goes on this way."

"Very close, too," said Charlie.

"Storm coming up over the Common when I left," explained Mr Smith, in his precise, high voice. "Expected it this morning. Far too sultry."

"I'm not surprised," said Mrs Biggs. "I felt it in my bones last evening. That was why I didn't go for a run today. My rheumatism's been chronic; crippled I was this morning. Couldn't 'ardly get my stockings on."

The two men exchanged glances, and turning together from the bar, took their glasses to a table near the door.

"Once she gets going on the screws, there's no stopping 'er," Charlie whispered to his friend. Mr Smith nodded agreement.

"I got the material," Mr Bentham continued. "You can do the job at my place if you like, evenings."

"Suits me."

"If you make a success of it like the last, there'll be other orders. I'm not advertising it, naturally. They're glad enough to get off the purchase tax, so they keep it to themselves, and don't mind giving a bit extra for the material. Mutual benefit society, eh?"

He laughed loudly and Mr Smith gave him a wan smile.

"It'll pay you more than the overtime the Union won't allow you to earn," went on Charlie. "And it's paid in cash

down, so there's no chance of questions being asked over your P.A.Y.E. After all, what's the 'arm? Why should we pay all these bloody taxes? We've bin working men all our lives. Let 'em get it from the idle rich. Which side are they on? Can you tell me that?"

"Politics apart," said Mr Smith profoundly. "Mind you, I'm Labour, Charlie, through and through, and every time. Always 'ave bin, in spite of the wife, and always will. But politics apart, in my opinion, they've made a mucker of it this time. A fair mucker."

"I'm with you, Arthur," agreed Charlie Bentham solemnly, "every word you spoke. Which night can you come up, and I'll get the 'adv to send her chairs in by then?"

VIII

YOUNG Graham, left to himself, spent the late afternoon and evening between his mother's rooms and the street. He was restless all the time, and at intervals hungry and thirsty. The clatter of his skates up and down the stairs madened those of the other inmates of the house who stayed indoors on that fine June day, but for the most part they were too lazy to do more than bawl at him from behind closed doors.

Graham paid no attention to their complaints. Never considered himself, he was not aware of any slightest obligation to other people. As a rule his mother treated him with indifference, occasionally with spite, and still more infrequently with a maudlin sentimentality that roused his childish disgust. He was used to fend for himself. Without Derek's reappearance, this evening would have been like all the others. He would have foraged for food and played and fought until the street was empty, and then, independent even in loneliness, would have curled up on his bed like a little animal to sleep.

But Derek's visit had disturbed him. It reminded him of his home three months ago when his brother was living there;

it made him aware of the present difference, when he was not. As the boy chewed a lump of bread, margarine and honey, he thought of his good dinner at the Williamses, and of the tasty fish supper of the night before. For the first time in three months he was sorry for himself. And when another descent to the street proved it empty, his companions all gathered into their respective homes, he did not, in his usual manner, drive from end to end of it, yelling as he went, but instead kicked off his skates on the doorstep, and retreated slowly up the stairs, seeing the banisters dissolve before him in a mist of his own tears.

He turned on the wireless; it was giving the ten o'clock news on the Light Programme, but the calm voice of the announcer was constantly overlaid by crackling and buzzing atmospherics. Outside the sky too was full of noise, distant rumblings, and the occasional swish of heavy drops from showers that died away before they had well begun.

Graham wondered if it was right to have the wireless on at all, but as it was a battery set he decided that no harm could come of it.

It was just after ten o'clock in summertime at the lightest period of the year, but all was dark except in the houses and under the street lamps. Above it might have been midnight. He leaned his forehead against the dirty window-pane, but hardly had he done so when a sharp flash of lightning split the blackness with a jagged line. The thunder, following hard upon it, crashed and rolled among the housetops. With an instinct as sure as it was primitive, Graham ran first to the wireless and then to the electric light switch, to turn it off, and so plunge himself into a covering darkness, where the gods of the sky could not find him. Then, still in haste, and filled with a mounting fear, he made for his bed, to dive under the dirty covers and lie still, with the blankets gathered up round his head.

The storm marched over Wandsworth, flashing and thundering; the rain followed. But long before it was over Graham had fallen asleep. He was tired by his long day and by the excitement of the night before. Too much had hap-

pened to him this week-end to allow even thunder and lightning to keep him awake.

The storm travelled on, spinning in a great arc that brought it back to Wandsworth again some four hours later. People who had lain awake uneasy and stifled since its first visitation, cursed the thunder as its growl swelled again menacingly. But Graham slept on, until he was shot out of his sleep by a crack that seemed to split the roof and rock the walls. So terrifying was its effect on the boy's half-roused consciousness that he was out of his bed and down the stairs before he realized that this was not the air-raid of his early childhood, but only the storm he had hidden from already once before that night.

Though he knew this, he could not stop running. More flashes, more terrible, breath-taking noise, pursued him down the stairs. The front door of the tenement house was never locked. Without considering where he was going, nor why, the boy slipped through, and hunching his shoulders against the vertical drive of the rain, pelted off down the street as fast as he could run.

He did not go very far. The sight of the Marshmans' shop window stopped him. He thought at once of the fish in the aquarium, wondering how they were faring, and whether fish could hear thunder or see lightning, and whether it meant anything at all to them if they could. He wanted desperately to reassure himself about their fate. Suppose lightning struck through water. Suppose it intertered with the little electric engine that pumped in the air. Suppose the fish got too much—or too little. Perhaps the Marshmans, upstairs in bed, had slept through the night and would wake in the morning to find the aquarium full of corpses.

He could not bear the idea, nor the uncertainty his imagination forced upon him. He pressed his nose to the glass of the shop front, trying to make out, in the blackness beyond, the outline of the door he had damaged. But the window dressing hid all but a crack or two, through which, in daylight, he might have peered into the shop. It was quite impossible to see anything in the middle of a night so black, when the nearest

street lamp was a good ten yards away, and dim at that. Besides, whenever he thought he could see beyond the cartons and cardboard advertisements, he discovered that he was gazing only at a reflection of himself and the street behind him. What light there was got no further than the surface of the glass, sending back his own pinched features to mock him.

A distant footfall made the boy swing round. No need for him, London-bred, to wait for a figure to turn the corner. He knew a copper's step without having to think about it. In a matter of seconds he had darted to the side of the Wickings' yard gate. In another minute he had shinned up the space between the gate-post and the rough wall and had dropped over into the yard.

The man on the beat had not been looking up the road, but across it, when he turned the corner. He saw no shadow move, and was too far away to hear the light scuffle of the boy's quick action. Methodically doing his duty, he moved forward, shining his torch on doors, and trying their handles as he passed.

Inside the Wickings' gate Graham crouched in absolute stillness. He shivered a little when a heavy hand rattled the yard gate. But the lock was securely fastened and the Law passed on, routine unbroken.

By now the rain had stopped falling; it seemed to have washed away the sultry heat of the evening, and Graham, wet to the skin, where he crouched inside the gate, shivered now from cold rather than fear. He dared not go back into the road until the policeman had finished his round, up one side and down the other. It did not occur to the boy that he might continue it into another street and perhaps not return at all. So he waited, patient and shivering, for a long time.

At last discomfort overcame his doubts. He stirred his chilled and tired brain to action. While he was waiting to go back home he might as well explore this yard, where he knew the Wickings kept their van and their fish.

He moved slowly in the dark, feeling his way. He had often seen the yard with the gates flung open to let out the van.

He knew which side it was usually parked, and felt a great relief when his groping hands met one of the mudguards in just the position he expected it to be. From that it was easy to define the rest of the vehicle, and to feel his way round it to the back of the house.

And here another landmark loomed before him, faintly lit by a cross-glow from the main road street lamps. It was the outhouse into which he had sometimes watched the fish unloaded from the van; he and his friends edging forward from the gates, until they were chased from the yard by the Wickings, anxious not to have their storehouse too closely inspected, even by children.

Feeling his way now to the door, he fumbled with the handle, and was astonished to find it turn easily, while the door moved gently towards him. He could not believe the Wickings had left their store unlocked, unless it was empty, waiting for the morning's fresh supply. He knew enough about household shopping to have heard that fish must not be bought on Monday morning because it would be stale. Billingsgate opened on Monday morning, but its supplies were not in most shops until Tuesday.

He pulled the door further open. A strong stench of fish lay in the air, sickening him, almost making him recoil. But curiosity prodded him forward. He felt before him with his hands. In the dim light he identified a window, below a slab, beside that a sink with a single tap. He was beginning to see better in the dark now, and by degrees made out, lying on the slab, a shadow that had substance and a form. It must be some very big fish, he decided, a big cod, or one of the kind they sometimes laid out all across the fishmonger's slab, with a sprig of parsley in its mouth and a notice stuck on it saying it was a king sturgeon. This must be a king sturgeon the Wickings had got hold of.

He put out a curious hand, eager to feel the big brute's scales and to run his fingers down the back to the spread tail. But he found no scales, no fishy tail or fins. He found a greasy smooth lump running down to a short stiff leg.

Whipping away his hand, he shot out through the door into

the yard, his heart beating fast in his terror. What had they got in there? Some sort of a body, it must be. He smelled his hand, but it told him nothing. The fish smell was everywhere, the door was soaked in fish-tainted water, the handle reeked of fish-coated hands. He remembered the short, stiff length tapering from the lump. Perhaps it was a 'dead dog. Why should it be? Whose dog? What did they want it for?

He crept in again. This time he found another leg and a short curled tail. He nearly fell down on the floor, stifling his laughter. The Wickings had got a pig in there. Or half a pig. A stolen pig. He laughed until he choked, and then checked the noise he made with both hands pressed to his mouth.

He went further. By the time he had felt his way along the whole length of the slab he had established the presence, besides the pig, of three smaller carcasses that he took to be mutton.

"Gorblimey!" he whispered to himself. "It's a blessed black-market dump!"

Trembling with excitement, he crept to the door, then, pulling out his Scout knife, turned back again, and, feeling for one of the sheep, cut himself a generous gobbet of flesh from the thigh. He stuffed it into his pocket together with the knife and finally left the store.

It was only now that he saw why he had been able, after his first attempt, to see so clearly. A narrow band of light bordered the curtain of the Wickings' back room. Someone was still up, or else had but recently got up to put on the light there.

Again Graham was near to panic. He swallowed hard, fighting to control himself, for fear of making any more noise. But soon, with a flash of insight, he became calm. Of course the Wickings were still up, because they had not locked their storehouse. It was quite simple. They were up to see to this meat. Perhaps they had the customers in there with them. They might come out at any minute. He must go.

He crept back towards the gate, and was immediately confronted with a fresh difficulty. It had been easy enough to climb in, but to get back the way he had come was another

matter. The gate from the inside presented a smooth surface, with no jutting gatepost to make a chimney between it and the angle of the house wall. He saw no way to get up.

But studying both ends of the gate in the dark it occurred to him that the wall against which he pressed on the left-hand side, searching for footholds, was the wall of the Marshmans' shop. If he could get into their backyard and from thence into the shop parlour, he would not only see the aquarium again, but would be able to let himself out into the street by unfastening the shop door from inside. If he chose his moment, no one would see him emerge, and the copper, when he went past again, would call up the Marshmans to secure their property.

It seemed a feasible plan to a boy made reckless by excitement, lack of sleep, and recurrent fear. He moved noiselessly back down the yard, skirting the storehouse with care, and speeded now by a sound of voices in the lit room behind the Wickings' shop.

At the far end of the yard only a fence divided it from the Marshmans' strip of garden. Graham, using the remains of an air-raid shelter to mount upon, was over this with the ease of a cat, and dropped as lightly on the other side.

He stood for a few minutes, thankful to have the fence between him and possible danger. It was fortunate he had done so in time, for he was not able to move before the voices he had heard swelled louder as the Wickings' back door opened. Then they died abruptly as Miss Wicking gave a warning "Hush!"

Graham crouched under the fence hardly daring to breathe, but peering through a convenient knot-hole in the direction of the sounds. The Wickings had gone to their store. He heard the door pulled wide open, and saw the flash, quickly screened, of a pocket torch. A few seconds later steps shuffled again, the back door re-opened, Miss Wicking whispered, "You'll want one of them kept up. The rest 'ad better go down the shelter tonight."

Though he did not hear every word of this, Graham understood the sense of it. The shelter meant the air-raid shelter

he had used to leave the Wickings' yard. He must not stay where he was. He must get inside the Marshmans' house before those Wickingses came out again. For, supposing they had carried into the house the carcase from which he had cut his fillet, the mutilation had even now been made plain to them. They might begin a search for him that would not end on their own premises.

He found his way to the window of the Marshmans' shop-parlour, and slipping his long-bladed Scout knife between the sashes, pressed back the catch and pushed up the bottom pane. As he did so the light from the Wickings' open door again filtered through the dividing fence. This time rapid steps hurried about their yard: there were muttered curses as they tripped over unseen obstacles. Miss Wicking's clear whisper came again.

"You *must* find 'im, whoever it is! No one couldn't climb out over the gate without setting off the alarm. Stands to reason 'e's still there! Try the van "

"You shut your trap," Mr Wicking panted. "And shut that bloody door. You'll 'ave 'alf the neighbourhood up if you go on this way."

"Did you try the van?" Miss Wicking persisted.

"Gawd give me patience!" cried her brother fiercely. "Will you damn well shut that door!"

"Shall I bring the other torch? You don't want to take risks."

"Shut that mucky door! I'm going over to Marshmans. I'll say I'm after a burglar that's swiped some of our stock. That's gospel, ain't it?"

In spite of his terror over Mr Wicking's latest proposal, Graham found time to wonder at the way they advertised themselves. Any genuine trespasser would know all the moves in advance, he thought contemptuously. But he was not prepared for Mr Wicking's final suggestion. He had waited too long, listening to their stupid search. Now, feeling pursuit was hard at his heels, he leaped quickly in through the window he had opened.

But he forgot the small table standing there, and also the

heavy plant pot it carried. His movement drove him straight on to the table, which collapsed to the ground with a loud bang, flinging plant and pot to the opposite wall, where they crashed in ruin. Graham had scarcely time to recover his breath after the disaster before the room light was switched on, and Mr Marshman appeared in the doorway. He was wearing a jacket over his pyjamas and held a car spanner in his hand. At sight of Graham he blinked rapidly.

"So it's you again, is it?" he said in a voice of great exasperation. "I might 'ave expected it. This time the law'll take its course, my lad. You see if it don't."

"I never meant to," whimpered Graham, rubbing his eyes with his sleeve. "I only wanted to—to see the fish."

"You did, did you?" said Mr Marshman grimly. "Funny time of day for it, I must say. You 'ave a good peek at 'em now, then, because it's the last time, you young limb, the very last time, so 'elp me."

"Graham Howard, you're a wicked, good-for-nothing boy," added Mrs Marshman, appearing behind her husband. She had put on a dressing-gown, which was tied in tight round her middle, and she wore a stiff row of metal curlers across her broad forehead. "Why aren't you in your bed this time of night?"

"It were the lightning," sobbed Graham. "It woke me up. I thought it was a raid."

"The thunder woke you, you mean."

"Don't argue with him," said Mr Marshman. "It's all a pack of lies. I'm going for the police."

"Why don't you just take 'im 'ome?" suggested Mrs Marshman, whose soft heart was already beginning to melt.

"There's no one there!" Graham wailed. "The lightning—I mean the thunder, woke me up and Mum wasn't there and..."

"You never went to see if she was there, did you? Did you? Speak the truth for once, if you can. Did you?"

"She never 'ardly is," moaned Graham. "And she's most always tight, any'ow."

"Poor kid," said Mrs Marshman, now wholly converted. "It's not altogether 'is fault."

"Having a bad mother don't excuse 'im from trespassing," said Mr Marshman firmly.

"You take 'im 'ome, Ben," his wife pleaded. "You don't want to be mixed up in a police court case."

At this fresh mention of the dreaded enemy, Graham sobbed so loudly that Mrs Marshman was impelled to pull him close to her. He was now so stifled by contact with her large, soft bosom that he had to stop crying in order to breathe. As soon as he could, he disengaged himself, standing apart, quiet but watchful.

During this interval Mr Marshman had gone into the shop to take the door key from a locked drawer in the counter. He put on only a single light above the cash register, in order to fit the small key he held into the drawer. Slight as the illumination was, it immediately attracted the man on the beat, who was pursuing his return journey along the pavement outside. A few rapid steps brought him to the Marshmans' window. Peering in, he saw a moving form, and at once knocked hard at the shop door. Mr Marshman, cursing heavily, opened it to him.

"What's going on 'ere?" demanded the constable.

"Can't I do wot I like on my own premises?" Mr Marshman countered.

"You the owner?"

"Do I look like a smash-and-grab?" asked Mr Marshman, displaying his pyjamas. "This 'ow they usually get themselves up for the job? I suppose you bin to a Police College, and got second sight."

The constable, who was young and keen, turned scarlet. He moved into the shop, closing the door behind him. At this moment Mrs Marshman, with her hand on Graham's shoulder, appeared from the shop-parlour. This completed the young officer's discomfiture, but he made his retreat in good order.

"This, your husband?" he asked sternly.

"To the best of my knowledge," answered Mrs Marshman.

"Your boy?"

"No. Him and 'is brother are friends of ours."

"What's he doing here at this time of night?"

"He was frightened to death of the storm, and so might anyone 'ave been, the way the thunder broke right over this street. He was all alone at 'is place, which 'e'd no right to be."

"How's that?"

"Father walked out a few weeks back: mother—well, she works at 'The Bear and Pole.' Goes 'ome late."

During this conversation Graham had spent the time trying to discover if these long-winded grown-ups felt any sympathy for him or not. He had just decided that he could risk standing away from Mrs Marshman, and stop keeping his eyes on the floor, when the next turn in the conversation made him break out again in cries and sobs.

"The nipper came to you as his only friends, I take it?"

"That's right. Mrs Marshman quelled her husband's gesture of repudiation.

"Know the father's address?"

"Not the number. It's a prefab up on the Common. The Wickings, next door 'ere, would know it."

"We'll get it. In my opinion, that's where he should have gone."

"It is, and then again, it isn't," said Mr Marshman, breaking a long silence.

"Come again."

The newsagent repeated his verdict, and then, to clarify it, took the constable apart and explained the position.

"It's a ruddy dilemma," agreed the latter. "Case for the Welfare Officer. I'll get on to it right away. You keeping the nipper here tonight?"

"No," said Mr Marshman emphatically.

"Oh, Ben!" protested Mrs Marshman.

"No."

"No?" asked the constable.

"No. It's no use, Lil. When I say no, I mean no!"

"O.K., O.K.," the policeman soothed him. "I'll take him along to the Station. Now you pipe down, son, or I'll charge you with breaking and entering."

His intended joke had a poor reception. The Marshmans looked at one another with wry faces, and Graham, knowing

it to be a true description of his behaviour, howled louder than ever.

"Now, now, you're too big to be making all that noise," Mrs Marshman told him. "Run and see the fish again and wipe your face. And hurry up. Don't keep everyone waiting."

When Graham was out of hearing she relieved herself of her feelings about the boy's parents. She so impressed the young officer that he left the shop feeling himself less an instrument of the law than a social reformer. Nevertheless, he knew enough of boys to issue one formidable and fairly effective warning.

"You keep close," he said, taking a firmer grip of Graham's arm. "And no 'anky-panky, mind, or you'll find yourself in Borstal in two shakes of a duck's arse."

Neither he nor his charge spoke again until both were standing before the sergeant in the charge room of the local Police Station.

"Name of Howard," Graham's guardian pronounced. "Ran away from home to friends because his ma wasn't back."

But the sergeant was not listening any longer. He had come round to Graham's side, and now reached out a large hand to the boy's pocket.

"And who gave you this?" he asked. "These *friends* of yours?"

He held up an object before the boy's unwilling eyes. The constable was flung into instant chagrin and shame. For, from the sergeant's fingers dangled a soft red mass; a dripping slice, and no mean single ration at that, of fresh, lean, juicy mutton.

IX

"OUT with it," demanded the Station sergeant. "How did you come by this 'cre?"

He took a folded evening paper from his pocket, and, laying it on the top of his desk, allowed the meat to sink slowly down on to it.

Graham began to cry his loudest. He could think of nothing whatever to say in explanation, and the sight of his former trophy reminded him of the Wickings' yard and its several terrors.

"Now, look here," said the sergeant. "Are you going to answer a simple question like a sensible lad or do I have to lock you up till you change your mind?"

"I took it," said Graham desperately.

"So I had inferred," agreed the sergeant, with heavy sarcasm. He pulled a piece of paper towards him.

"Name?"

"Graham Howard."

"Age?"

"Thirteen in October."

"Twelve and a half. Address?"

"Number Four flat, Eleven, Vincent Street."

"Parents living?"

"Dad's gone off on 'is own."

"Live with your mother, do you?"

"She never come 'ome. I was scared of the—of the thunder—so I couldn't stop in bed."

"Why didn't your mother come home? Where was she?"

Again the constable repeated his information, and this time the sergeant listened. Then he turned back to the boy.

"Did you take this meat from one of the other rooms in the house where you live?"

"No, I never."

"Where did you get it?"

Graham hung his head, but did not answer. The constable gave his views.

"These Marshmans said he went to their place, but I don't see how he got in by the shop door without my noticing. I'd 'ave had to run into 'im on the street either before or after he stopped at their door."

"True enough," said the sergeant. He turned once more to Graham.

"You've been breaking into a butcher's," he said fiercely. "Now then, own up."

"No, I never! Cross my heart!"

"There isn't any butcher handy just about there," said the constable. "There's only that fish and chips run by the Wickings."

A third man, who had come in quietly during the questions, now spoke.

"Did you say *Wicking*?"

"Yes, sir. Brother and sister. They . . ."

But the newcomer nodded him into silence. Then, laying a hand on Graham's shoulder, he pushed the unwilling boy towards an inner door. Graham expected this to open on a prison cell, and yelled accordingly. But the door disclosed only another room and two men in plain clothes.

"Phillips, take the kid to his father at number thirty-eight on the Common. One of these prefabs opposite the Methodist Church. Tell him he was picked up at the newsagent's in Vincent Street, after running away from home. Tell him he's responsible, being the boy's father."

"Yes, sir."

"Give him a cup of cocoa and something to eat before you start," the inspector concluded, shutting the door behind him.

"You can get back on the beat, Newson," he told the constable who had brought Graham in.

"How did you know the father's address, sir?"

"On account of the name—Howard. The kid's mother was picked up incapable an hour or so back. She's here now, in Number One. Maud Howard. We've had her in before—quite a character. She still knew her own address, and she knew hubby's, too. And a lot more besides. What we don't know now about Mr Alfred Howard would go on a penny postage stamp."

"Will the father keep the kid this time, sir?"

"He'll have to. She'll be up before the Bench in the morning. The boy can't very well go to her place."

"Funny about that meat, sir, isn't it?"

"That's all, Newson."

The constable left to return to his beat. Presently Graham

left also, this time in charge of the detective constable called Phillips. He was calm now and more confident, having eaten a generous meal of jam sandwich and cocoa.

In the C.I.D. room at the Station a conference was held. The sergeant from the charge-room had carried his prize there and it now lay on its piece of newspaper, red and inviting, while three men gazed at it with an interest far removed from greed.

"Wicking, eh? The name of the owner of that van we pulled up. Driven by a chap called Biggs."

"Delivering offal to a Cats' Home."

"On his way there or back?"

"There. The offal was genuine."

"Follow the van?"

"No. Not this time."

They considered in silence.

"That's no butcher's cut," said the inspector. "Where could the boy have picked it up?"

"The Marshmans live next door to the Wickings."

"That's right. So they do." After a pause he said, "We'd better go down there in the morning."

"To the Wickings?"

"No. The Marshmans. That's where the boy turned up, isn't it? That's where he got the stuff, most likely."

The sergeant made no answer, but went back to the charge-room to write up his report.

It was, by this time, nearly four in the morning. The storm had cleared away, and already the deep blue of a sky sprinkled with stars foretold the cloudless day that was to follow. Already, as Graham and the plain-clothes constable climbed the short hill to the Common, a paler streak ahead of them in the east showed where the sun, impatient of his short summer rest, hurried again to the horizon.

Graham, being town-bred and reared, had no eyes for an horizon, nor for cloud, nor stars, nor the magnificence of daybreak. And, these natural disabilities apart, he was too young and too tired just then to think of anything but himself

and his personal needs. The constable, too, thought only of his charge, the probable unpleasantness ahead, and the uncertainties of his calling.

But the dispassionate dawn had no need of their regard. The deep blue lightened until the houses were no longer black silhouettes but grey and white ghosts. When, at last, Graham and his escort found the prefab they were looking for, a single horizontal shaft of gold had hung a glittering banner of plane-tree leaves above its drab roof. But they found no wonder and no welcome in the sight.

The constable lifted the knocker on the door to bring it down sharply. He repeated this a good many times. After the fourth attempt a dog in the prefab next door began to bark with hysterical fury, and was quelled by a similar outburst from its owner.

At last a scuffling noise inside number thirty-eight encouraged the detective to further efforts. Heavy footsteps sounded, and the door, which was a little warped and difficult to open, was wrenched back.

"What the bleeding 'ell . . . ?" Mr Howard demanded, and immediately fell silent.

"This your boy?" the constable asked, with all the dignity he could muster.

"Wot if 'e is?"

"Well, is he?"

"Wot's 'e done?"

Graham edged back to take shelter behind his escort, but the latter, mistaking his movement for an attempt to escape, gripped his arm so tightly that the boy whimpered with pain.

"Take yer bloody 'ands off of 'im," shouted Mr Howard. "Keep yer jujitsu for one of yer own size."

"I didn't hurt him. Is he your boy? Can't you answer a plain question?"

"Yes, 'e is. Graham, come over 'ere to me."

His voice was rough, but it held a note Graham recognized from rare moments when he had had his father to himself. He found his arm unloosed, stumbled forward, and was caught against Mr Howard's broad chest.

The constable explained how Graham came to be in his charge, gave a general warning about the boy's future, and turned to go.

"'E was with 'is ma," Mr Howard's voice pursued him. "'Ow was I to know she neglected 'im?"

"You could 'ave had a good guess," said the constable, coming back.

"It was me she always picked on, not the kids."

"It wasn't a question of picking on them. I told you, she wasn't there at all."

"Where was she?"

"At the Station, if you want to know. Incapable. Comes up at ten-thirty this morning. Any questions?"

Mr Howard muttered a brief vehement curse, and pulling Graham inside the house with him, slammed the door shut in the constable's face.

The latter stood looking at this barrier for a few seconds, feeling nothing but pity for the child, in having two such hard cases for parents. Then, remembering Graham's spectacular theft and its implications, he hardened his heart. He was only a detective constable, but he knew the inside details of a good many such affairs. Respectability and a love of order had sent him into the police force. There was nothing respectable nor orderly about being caught with a month's ration of t'esh meat in your pocket. The boy came of the same breed as his parents; already, it seemed, he was beginning to take after them. As he turned away from the prefab to go back to the Station, Phillips could not help wondering, somewhat irrelevantly, to whom, as things now stood, the boy's succulent prize would fall.

Graham was put to bed in the small second bedroom of the prefab, where Mr Howard had slept as a lodger when he first went there to live. He had not occupied this room very long. A week later he had moved into the widow's bed, and the spare room had been empty again. Miss Collings saw no point in making extra work for herself. Nor had she ever been one to look far ahead, otherwise she would not have married

Mr Collings, whose diabetes had been already diagnosed when she first met him. This diabetes, always partially disabling in his case, had proved fatal in the end, but before that it had kept their joint standard of living far below their neighbours', even in the years just before the war, when food was cheap and plentiful for all classes. She⁴ was now, with Mr Howard's support, better off than ever before; and though he was often taciturn and occasionally bad-tempered, she found him a more stimulating companion than her late husband. He gave her a generous household allowance, too, and did not demand or expect too much of her. The unforeseen arrival of Graham was the first setback she had experienced in her new relationship.

She lost no time in making her complaint known. If Graham had not been so tired that he fell asleep directly he lay down, he must have been kept awake by Mrs Collings's rebellious criticism. Certainly Mr Howard had no more rest that night. It was useless for him to explain that he was not responsible, that the thing had been sprung upon him, that you couldn't argue with the police, that he had his job to think of, that Maudie was a terror and always had been and always would be, that children were more trouble than they were worth, that she, Eva Collings, had had a good deal out of him, and had better watch her step, because as far as she was concerned, the law was definitely not on her side. Everything he suggested to stop the flow of her bitterness only provided her with fresh material for the attack. In the end, when smothering his head under the bedclothes and maintaining silence proved as useless as argument, he got up, dressed, and left the house. Mrs Collings found herself alone, wondering if she would ever see him again.

A chill spread over her at the thought. It was bad enough not having any real hold on him. It had galled her considerably every now and then when she wanted a thing he did not agree to. She had always known she could let her temper rule her so far and no further. Now she had forgotten this, perhaps fatally, in the upset of Graham's arrival. Furthermore, this morning's events showed her all too plainly where Alf's real

interests lay. There had been no question of sending Graham back to his mother. On the contrary, once the police had gone, he had treated the lad with real gentleness and affection. She understood at last the reason for the long brooding silences. The man had been missing his family. Though his wife had forced him to leave her, he still, at the bottom of his heart, wanted his former home.

She set herself to repair, if she could, the damage of the earlier shock. All morning she cleaned the prefab, polishing any object capable of a rewarding shine. When Graham woke at midday, bewildered at first, then terrified, she reassured him, but let him see that here there would be no nonsense.

"You bin running wild. Anyone can see that," she told him, standing by the kitchen table on which she had set out his breakfast of cornflakes, bread and jam, and tea. "We'll have this straight from the start, if you stay here, and it's for your dad to say if you do or not. While you're in this house you do as I say. Got that?"

"Yes, ma," said the boy in a subdued voice.

"And don't call me ma. It's common, see? Call me Mrs Collings."

"Yes, Mrs Collings."

"If you're a good boy, I'll let you call me Auntie, perhaps."

The hell you will, thought Graham, for whom the term meant kindness, security, a fat knee to sit on, and a great, soft shoulder to support his head. He had forgotten her proper name, his Auntie at Stansford. He had not thought of her for years. He had barely listened when Derek had told him Aldershot was near her home. But she occupied all the background of his mind, and to think of giving her name to this thin, black-haired woman with the fierce eyes was ludicrous. He said nothing, but went on with his breakfast more carefully than before.

"I suppose you ought to be in school today, as it's a Monday?" Mrs Collings stated, rather than asked.

Reality poured over the boy's mind in a cold shower.

"What time is it? Will I be late?"

"It's past noon. You'd better give it a miss today."

"I can't do that. The master'd be ever so wild. Give us a copper for the bus, ma."

"That's no way to ask. Certainly not."

"Oh, please, Mrs Collings. Give us a copper for the bus, please."

"I've told you it's too late."

"I can say I was sick. If I don't go they'll want a sustificate off you—honest, they will."

She knew this was true. It would mean explanations to the Education Authority or a made-up story for the doctor; either was likely to fail.

"Very well. I don't know if your dad would approve of you going off, but he didn't say anything before he left. You go to school then, if you want to. Though I must say you aren't fit to be seen there, in those clothes. What time will you be back?"

"Half after four."

"Your dad has his dinner at six. You can have yours with him."

"Will you be having yours then as well?"

"What's it got to do with you? Yes, I will, if you want to know. Here, I'll find you something clean to put on. You can't go like that from my house."

Surprisingly she brought out of a drawer a shirt not much too large for Graham. She had no suitable shorts, but the shirt made a good deal of difference, especially when his face was clean and his hair damped with water and combed.

"I'll have the water hot for you tonight and you can have a jolly good bath."

"Can I 'ave a copper for the bus—Mrs Collings—please?"

"Just this once, you can. You'll 'ave to start in good time tomorrow and walk it."

"Shall I be here tomorrow?"

"That's for your father to say. I don't know, I'm sure."

Graham suspected this remark. Mrs Collings seemed to be the kind of woman who would shout her way to gaining her own ends. He disliked her already, but he did not despise her

as he did his own mother. She could pull a fast one, he felt sure. And it was plain that she had the support of his father. He did not fully understand the situation at the prefab, but he knew from his mother that it was something disgraceful, and from his school friends that it was something to snigger at. He was determined to be cautious until his mind was clearer.

But the days passed without much enlightenment. Graham was fed regularly now, and well. He was made to do his homework at the sitting-room table in the prefab, while Mrs Collings kept an eye on him through the open door of the kitchen, and the wireless blared at his elbow, loud enough for her to hear it while she cooked the dinner. He was sent to bed at half-past nine. If he stayed out later than this with his former friends in Vincent Street, he got no bed-time cup of cocoa when he came in. He was made to have a good wash every evening, and a bath on Friday night. His father took him to the hairdresser every fortnight. Neither Mr Howard nor his mistress ever discussed the boy after the first morning of his arrival; but they seemed to watch one another in their behaviour towards him as if to calculate their respective shares in the unspoken bargain between them.

Graham thrived. The Welfare Officer, a wise woman of great humanity and tolerance, overcame the scruples of one or two religious bodies, who, through contact with Maud Howard, in their efforts to redeem her, wanted to withdraw the child from a house of sin. Graham's morals, the Welfare Officer insisted, were helped more by three square meals and ten hours' sleep than by any amount of admonition. The discipline was rough, without affection on Mrs Collings's part, and it was applied for selfish ends. But it served its turn.

Derek Howard, meanwhile, went on learning to be a soldier. In his dormitory at Aldershot, before he slept, he invented scenes and conversations with Netta, a gentler, home-loving

Netta, whom he loved far more thoroughly than he did her living prototype. He worried a bit over Graham, whom he supposed still to be living with his mother. But he reminded himself that two years could not fail to pass in time.

He wrote to no one, and no one wrote to him.

SECOND LEAVE

X

JUST before Derek was due for his second leave from Aldershot, he had a short letter from Marion Trent. It took some time to find him, because, though she had remembered his unit, she had never known his personal number. However, after wandering about the military establishment for some days, the letter finally reached him. It contained the exciting, extraordinary news that Marion had a baby brother. He was now nearly a month old, she wrote, and added that all at 'Monteve' would be very pleased to see him any time he liked to call.

The mystery of Mrs Trent's illness was now explained, and Derek laughed to himself when he remembered his conversation with Marion, so much at cross-purposes, so ridiculous if you came to think of it. The silly kid, not to tell him. As if babies were anything to go up the pole about.

His impatience with Marion's shyness was soon forgotten in a rush of feeling over Mrs Trent's achievement. Surprised, when he thought of her probable age, gave place to delight. She re-established herself, though this was hardly necessary, as the mother-figure he lacked. He was eager to make his second visit to her house. The new baby seemed to him to open a door he had believed closed for ever.

He decided that Graham too must share the pleasures of reunion. This was important from every point of view. So he answered Marion's letter by return of post, sending his congratulations and explaining about his leave. He would like to see them the following Sunday, if convenient—he and Graham. It would be a real treat for the boy, he added, not sure if it was good manners to take with him an extra, uninvited, guest.

But he need not have worried. Marion at once sent back a

picture postcard of the *Queen Mary*, with his correct address set out in full, and a single line. "O.K. for you and Graham, Sunday. Be seeing you. Marion." He had both the letter and the postcard in his pocket when he went on leave.

This time he reached Wandsworth before four, not stopping on the way, except to hitch a fresh car when the first one went off his route. He was lucky enough, at Esher, to get a lift right through to Upper Richmond Road. He hurried along Vincent Street, dodging the yelling, tumbling children in his path, and looking to left and right for Graham.

But the boy was nowhere to be seen. Dozens of thin figures in shirts and shorts, with sandals and without, were playing their various games on the pavement, or running dizzily about the road. Derek had the familiar feeling of uncertainty in the face of a crowd; the customary doubt of recognition. So many boys just like Graham. What did his young brother really look like? Could he remember that? No, he could not.

When he had walked from end to end of the street, he had to agree with his eyes. Graham was not there. Probably indoors, having a drink at the tap, or sitting on the floor, busy with his skates. Derek walked back to the house and began to climb the staircase, two steps at a time.

But his mother's sitting-room was empty, or rather it was bloated, as on his previous visit, with a mess of rubbish and stale food, and odds and ends of clothing. He noticed that the wireless set had gone, and that there was a fresh hole burned in the carpet. One of these days the old bitch would set the whole place alight, he thought morosely.

He searched about for Graham's skates and his model aeroplane, but did not find these either. Anxiety was now added to his disappointment.

Even so he did not suspect that the boy had gone. He sat down, pulled a crumpled evening paper from his pocket, and lit a cigarette. It was only then, in the following quiet, that he heard sounds from the next room.

The house was full of voices at all times, heard for the most part indistinctly, with occasional crescendos of rage, hysteria, or mere emphasis. He was used to that. The peculiar quality

of the noise he now heard was its essential familiarity. It was something he had known all his life, something he had lain and listened to in his first small cot in his parents' room, had heard from the next room when he had been away from them. It was the conversation, intermittent, low-pitched, slurred, of a man and woman in bed together.

His brain being still partly occupied with his newspaper, was slow to draw any conclusion. Only after several minutes did he begin seriously to consider the voices. One was his mother's. The noise came from her room, and her part in its composition was fully recognizable. Equally certainly the partner was not his father.

A dull rage began to mount in Derek's brain. This was the final squalor, capping the condition of the room in which he sat. This accounted for Graham's absence. She must have sent the boy out on some long and certain errand while she received her visitor. He was sorry, not for her sake, but for his own, that he had not sent her any message about his leave.

He let the newspaper drop to the ground while he considered what he should do. The easiest course would be to leave as silently as possible, and not come back until after opening hours at the pubs. Then she would have gone and he would have Graham to himself for the evening.

But suppose the boy came back while his mother was still occupied with her friend? Suppose he began searching for his mother? Rather than risk that, Derek thought, he would stay there himself, to keep guard.

There was one other course open to him, and this, in the end, he took, with a measure of bitter satisfaction. Leaving the sitting-room door open, he crept on stocking feet to the next landing below. Here he put on his boots again, and marched sturdily up, whistling as he moved. He gave a sharp rap on his mother's door, waited, listened, then breaking into the same tune again, walked on into the sitting-room, where he stood waiting.

In the bedroom there was a kind of oppressed panic. Derek heard several sharp exclamations, subdued cries from his mother, and creakings from the bed-springs. He

continued to wait. Having got so far, he was determined to see who would come out. But he kept his back to the open living-room door, even after he heard the pair come out and knew that they were on the landing. Only after heavy feet had trodden down the first flight of stairs did he move. In a flash he was on the landing, leaning over the banisters. He found himself looking down on the broad figure and partially bald head of Mr Biggs, landlord of 'The Bear and Pole.'

"Derek!" said his mother at his elbow, breathless, and ghastly in her dishevelled terror. "I never thought to see . . ."

She ended with a little helpless gesture of despair. In the look on her son's face at that moment she saw the truth of her degradation: the plain unbearable fact of her decline. She clutched at her disordered clothes.

"Where's Graham?" Derek asked. It was impossible to do anything about Mr Biggs, except ignore him altogether.

"Graham?"

"You heard. Where is 'e?"

She suddenly burst into tears, rocking herself to and fro with one hand on the banisters. To get her off the landing and into the sitting-room, Derek had to put an arm round her. His flesh rebelled at the contact, but he forced her along, and finally got her into a chair, waiting until she was calm enough to speak.

"Your dad took 'im. 'E went off the night you left. Ran away on 'is own. The police found 'im, and went to Alf. So now 'e lives up there, at that woman's house. Disgrace, I call it. They 'ad the face to tell me 'e was put under the Welfare Officer. Fat lot of welfare 'e's likely to get in 'er place."

"No worse than he was getting here, by the looks of it."

"Are you trying to insult your own mother?" said Mrs Howard shrilly.

"Impossible," returned her son, staring at her with hatred.

She collapsed again, and when at length she lifted her head, she saw that the room was empty.

Derek needed help, and perhaps even more urgently, comfort. He looked for them in the one place where his faith

was whole, Syd Williams's home. All the way there on the bus he concentrated his thoughts on Syd's family, Jean and Mrs Hope and little Marie. Their steady happiness and reasonable comfort were a measure of Syd's achievement as a man. To Derek they were also a token, a symbol of hope.

He knocked at the door of Syd's house, but not loudly, because the street held few people and he felt self-conscious standing there in his uniform. When there was no response, he summoned his courage to let the knocker fall more heavily, and afterwards immediately lost heart, thinking that the whole family was away for the afternoon. It would be very natural on a Saturday, and a fine one at that.

He stood close up to the door, listening. But as he moved back to turn away, uncertain where to go next, he heard, quite distinctly, an interior door open and shut again. There were slow steps in the passage. Mrs Hope, at any rate, was at home.

She opened the door a few inches, peering out cautiously to see who had disturbed her.

"Afternoon, Mrs Hope," Derek said cheerfully.

The old woman stared at him, no recognition in her face.

"Is Syd in?" he continued, deciding against explanations at this stage.

"No, 'e ain't."

"Oh, I see. Is Jean?"

"No, she ain't, neether."

The door began to close, but he held it back.

"Have they gone out for the afternoon? Will they be back? You remember me, Mrs Hope, don't you? Derek Howard. Me and young Graham were over a while back."

Very slowly the door opened a little wider.

"You'd best come in a minute," Mrs Hope said. "I can't stand for long. It's me 'ip."

He followed her slowly into the living-room. Even today, after six weeks of summer heat, there was a fire in the range and the old woman's chair was drawn up close to it.

"You'll excuse me if I sit down," said Mrs Hope. "Make yourself comfortable."

Derek found the same chair near the window from which, on the last occasion, he had watched Graham playing with Marie in the little garden. He waited patiently for Mrs Hope to speak. It was no use muddling her by asking questions. You had to have patience with old people and children and dogs.

"They've took 'im in 'orspital," said Mrs Hope, when she had settled herself. "Last Wednesday week. Jean's up there with Marie now."

"Syd's in hospital!" Derek felt suddenly suffocated; he could hardly speak.

"That's right. He 'ad to go to the doctor's in the end, on account of not eating. Made 'im that weak he couldn't do 'is work. Dr Forrest said he needed tests and that, and the doctor at the 'orspital said 'e'd 'ave to go in for them. They sent for 'im last Wednesday week."

"Is he still there?"

"They think it may be operation case."

"Don't they *know*?"

She looked at him out of her old, bleared eyes, pitying his indignant innocence.

"When I was a girl," she said slowly, "there was a woman next door where we lived, she died of a internal complaint. Anæmia of the spleen, the doctor called it. They couldn't do nothing for 'er."

"Is that what Syd's got, anæmia?"

"As I was telling you, she died, that one did, poor soul. But years later, two months before I married Mr Hope, it was, my own mother got the same thing, and they took 'er spleen out for it. Made a wonderful recovery, she did, though she lay at death's door the best part of eight weeks. Hospitals weren't what they are now in those days."

"How d'you know she had the same thing?"

"It was the same doctor," said Mrs Hope, making nothing of her dramatic advantage. "'E remarked on the coincidence when 'e told us she'd 'ave to go in. It was the second case 'e'd 'ad in the same street, with fifteen years almost to the day between the two. Said 'e'd not 'ad another anywhere else between."

"So what?" asked Derek, staring at her with sullen eyes.

"They go on finding things out," said Mrs Hope simply. "Syd's been a bit of a mystery to them, but they'll get to the bottom of it, giving 'em time."

"Much good that'll do if it takes fifteen years. What if he's unlucky like the one you mentioned first?"

Mrs Hope turned her face to him again.

"We're all in the hands of the Lord," she said, and added, "but you don't look the kind to attend chapel yourself."

"Too right," said Derek defiantly. He got to his feet.

"Ask Jean to drop me a line how he is," he asked when she had opened the front door for him.

"Does she know your address?"

He went back into the living-room to write it down for her. She stood at the door with the paper in her hand.

"I won't forget to tell 'er," she said.

He was suddenly touched by her patience and her calm good-natured treatment of him.

"Thanks a lot, Mrs Hope," he said, awkwardly pulling off his service cap, which he had only just fixed back on his head. "I—well—I'll be getting along now."

"You're welcome," she said.

He felt he could trust her to deliver his message to Jean. There was a lot more he wanted to say. He would have liked to unburden his heart of its cold fear for Syd, his perplexity over this mysterious illness. He would have liked to explain how the trouble in this house built up the trouble in his own to unendurable heights. His anxieties and sorrows at that moment were overwhelming him, and here was a human being whose heart seemed still to be warm, and whose limited brain still worked reasonably and with common sense. But she was too old. He shrank from the tremendous weight of her experience. She was able to support it, all those far-off griefs and calamities, joys and achievements and failures; but he could not even face hearing of them at second-hand. The woman with the big spleen was quite enough for one afternoon.

He stood, shifting his weight from one foot to the other

while his unhappiness pushed him to and fro. In the end he muttered a scarcely audible "Good afternoon, Mrs Hope," and walked away, his steps quickening as he went down the street.

Mrs Hope shook her head slowly at the retreating figure. But as soon as she was back in the living-room she put the piece of paper with Derek's address in the jar at the end of the mantelpiece, where Jean kept her ration books and other odds and ends of papers.

Derek decided, as no advice on his private concerns was available, to take matters into his own hands. In other words, to go to the place where Graham was now living—he would not, even to himself, call it his father's home—and take the boy out of it. What he would do with him when his leave ended the next day, he did not try to imagine. The first thing was to get hold of the address.

Instinctively, he chose the Marshmans rather than the Wickings, to ask about this. They had not known properly on his last leave, but they might do so now.

He reached their shop between five and six, when most people had gone home to tea. After one other customer had left, he found himself alone with Mr Marshman.

"Twenty Woods," he said, and when the packet had been handed over and paid for, went on: "They never told me Graham was up at Dad's. Have you got the gen on that?"

Mr Marshman considered, weighing up Derek's question against the story of Graham's trespass; the young man's probable anger against his obviously robust physique. At last he came out from behind the counter.

"The wife's in there," he said, pointing to the door, since repaired, that Graham had broken in his first accident. "You go in and 'ave a little chat with 'er. I got to stay 'ere to see to things. Go on in," he repeated encouragingly, and then as Derek still hesitated, raising his voice, "Lil, 'ere's Derek 'Oward come to inquire about young Graham."

Mrs Marshman lost no time in opening the shop-parlour door to the visitor, and presently Derek had heard the full

account, from the Marshman point of view, of his brother's escapade and its sequel.

"And if you ask me," said Mrs Marshman, leaning forward to look into Derek's gloomy and downcast face, "if you ask me, our young man is better off where 'e is, Mrs Collings or no Mrs Collings."

"That her name?" Derek asked.

Mrs Marshman nodded. She went on to give him the address of the prefab and details of its interior, the food served there, and the general routine followed.

"You see, it isn't as if I didn't know the truth of what I'm telling you," she went on, aware that Derek had not believed a word of it "Graham told me all that with 'is own lips. He does a paper round for us now," she added triumphantly.

Derek looked at her with frank surprise, but a mounting hope. "A paper round?"

She nodded.

"The better-class district up the hill," she said. "Eight o'clock delivery. Always punctual to the minute, wet or fine, and back 'ere in good time to put away the bike before 'e goes on to school."

"Graham does that?"

"Why not? Makes 'is bit of pocket-money, and I must say that Mrs Collings treats 'im fair, takes the half of it, ut leaves 'im the rest. It's worth 'is while, apart from the fish.

"Oh, the *fish*," said Derek, understanding all at once. He turned to look at the aquarium.

"We let 'im trim the weed and that," said Mrs Marshman. "'E never forgets. Saving up for a tank of 'is own, 'e tells me."

Derek smiled at her shyly. At first he had felt nothing less than despair, hearing of Graham's wild behaviour. But this meant forgiveness, and not only that, but a step in the right direction for the boy. It melted his grief over Syd to hear Graham praised. And by people he had seriously offended. It meant that his young brother had already retrieved much that he had lost.

"I should like to thank you for what you've done for him,"

he said self-consciously. "There's not many would have done the like."

"I don't know so much," answered Mrs Marshman. "Having no kiddies of our own, I like to see 'im making a fuss of those blessed fish. You'd be surprised what 'e's read about them. Got a book from the Library. Studies it proper. It's a scream to 'ear 'im talk to them. As if they could 'ear 'im through the glass, bless 'im."

Derek was not sure if she meant that the fish were naturally deaf, or merely impeded by the walls of their home. The idea she raised, however, struck him as so comic that he laughed aloud. At which Mrs Marshman laughed too, thankful she had at last succeeded in cheering the poor boy up. She found a few more funny things to say about the aquarium; and by the time Derek got up to go, the world seemed to him a much less dismal place than when he entered the shop. In his feeling of general goodwill and hopefulness, he bought another packet of Woodbines, which he stuffed into his pocket beside the first.

When he had gone and the shop was empty Mr Marshman looked into the shop-parlour.

"Balmy," he said, touching his forehead. "Up the wall. What 'ave you done to 'im?"

"Me? Nothing, except cheer the poor devil up over young Graham. They don't ever write to 'im. 'E's only just found out the boy's at 'is father's. Didn't even know their number."

"I suppose you give it 'im?"

"Yes, I did. What's the 'arm in that?"

Mr Marshman retreated from her tone of voice. "Nothing. Nothing. 'E'll find 'is match up there."

"Meaning Mrs Collings?"

Mr Marshman nodded.

"'E'd every right to know 'is own father's address," said Mrs Marshman. "There's half a dozen others could 'ave give it to 'im if I 'adn't."

"Keep your hair on," said her husband, satisfied now that he had raised doubts in her mind of the wisdom of her conduct.

"I never said nothink."

"Only put me in the wrong," said Mrs Marshman. "As usual."

But her counter-attack lacked fire as well as conviction. Several times that evening she hoped there would be no sort of trouble at the prefab, because if Graham should be taken away from her now, when her affection for the boy was mounting day by day, and life was filling with unlooked-for colour and richness, she just could not endure it. She would tell Ben so, and he could put that in his pipe and smoke it.

XI

DEREK had spent just over half an hour at the Marshman's shop. When he came out he found the sky was overcast. A dry wind had sprung up while he sat indoors; it had found clouds in the west and swept them in over London. Though the summer heat still hung in the air, the colours and the harsh lines of the town suggested late autumn.

He decided to walk up to the Common. His limbs had a twitch and jump that asked for exercise. It would be a good thing to unwind the spring a bit, he thought, before tackling his father's fancy.

The walking did him good. It cleared his brain and at the same time gave it a rest. He had spent too much of this day already listening to other people's stories of events he had not taken any part in. Almost as bad as reading a book, only not quite. Walking gave him confidence. He felt the excellence of the young strong machine of his body, how it moved forward, dodged collision with others, leaned to the gusts of the wind and overcame them. His double excitement, induced equally by the prospect of seeing the Trents the next day and of facing the usurper tonight, was carried off by his exertions. He arrived on the Common very quickly after leaving Vincent Street, and had no particular difficulty in finding number thirty-eight.

Nor did the sight of the prefab's insignificant exterior alter

in any way his determination to go through with his plan to remove Graham from there. The only question in his mind was how best to force an entry. So he slackened his pace as he neared the little house, passing it with slow steps in order to gain a good view of it from every side before going up to the door.

It was just then that Graham saw him. As in his own street, the boy was playing with a group of other children, all of them running in and out among the prefabs, some on roller skates, using the narrow paths round the buildings, but the majority with bare feet on the remnants of grass or hard-packed earth, where the grass had been worn to mud level. Graham was with the latter group, but he wore sandshoes. When he saw Derek he gave a wild yell of pleasure and rushed to greet him.

"Well," said Derek, catching him by the shoulders. "This is a nice how-d'you-do, I must say."

The boy laughed. He had long ago expiated his crime at the Marshmans'; even at school the joke about his father and Mrs Collings had palled.

"Come on in and see Auntie," he said.

"See *who*?"

"Mrs Collings," said Graham in a low voice, suddenly uneasy. Derek's face embarrassed him. It reminded him of his own earlier feelings on this subject.

"The only Auntie you've got is Mrs Trent at Stansford," said Derek in a low, fierce voice. He gripped the boy's arm hard. "And don't you forget it, neether."

"Dad's gone up to the Park," said Graham. "She's at 'ome, though."

Derek found himself smiling. His father for many years had spent the light summer Saturday evenings with some of his workmates playing bowls. Apparently his changed way of living had not altered his hobbies. The young man began dimly to understand that it had altered surprisingly little in Mr Howard's life, neither his work, his habits, his interests, his principles, nor his convictions; merely his cook, house-keeper, and bed-fellow. Some of Derek's former respect for

his father came back to him as he grasped this unyielding approach to life's vicissitudes.

Graham led his brother in through the back door. Mrs Collings was turned away from them, stirring something on the gas stove. She heard the sound of two pairs of feet, however, and said, in her strident voice, without looking round, "Now then, out you go, the pair of you! I'll call you, Graham, when your tea's ready."

Derek instantly hated her. There was authority, of a cold, hectoring kind, in her harsh tones. He resented bitterly the use of this authority upon Graham, and by implication, upon himself. He felt a savage joy in knowing how he would startle her. In his deepest man's voice he said, "Is that Mrs Collings?"

Her audible gulp was very satisfying; she whirled round with the spoon in her hand, dripping hot steaming particles on to the floor.

"What the 'ell . . . ?"

"You are Mrs Collings?"

"Who are you, and what d'you think you're doing in my house?"

"Derek Howard, and I've as good a right here as Graham. Better, if it comes to that, being the eldest."

Mrs Collings's mouth, which had been dropping slightly open during this speech, now shut with a snap.

"'Ow do I know you're speaking the truth?"

"It is Derek," shouted Graham excitedly. "Up on leaf, aren't you, Derek? Aren't you?" he repeated, but his brother took no notice of him.

"D'you think I'd be here at all if I wasn't?" asked Derek bitterly. "I come to see Dad, but as 'e's gone, I'll get on with what I come for, and get out of it."

"Do!" she said, nodding fiercely in his direction. "I can't for the life of me see what you're stopping for at all."

"You will in a minute. Graham!" he directed, turning to his brother, "go and get your things. You're coming with me."

"That 'e isn't," said Mrs Collings, abandoning her cooking. She prudently turned off the gas under the pot she was stirring,

and laid down her spoon on the side of the draining board at the sink.

"You can't stop me," said Derek. "Except by force, and I'm your match there, if Dad is. You got no legal claim, not a vestige."

"He won't want to go." She raised her voice to Graham, who had slipped out through the sitting-room door into his bedroom, where he began gathering together a great quantity of rubbish. "You don't want to leave your Auntie, do you? Tell 'im you don't."

"I want to go with Derek," said Graham simply. "I'd always go with Derek."

"You see!"

"You've no right to take 'im. The Welfare Officer'll be on to you."

"I can settle with her. There's been no court order, has there?"

"Your dad took 'im when 'is mother deserted 'er 'ome. I've undertaken to look after 'im, and I'll do my duty, Derek Howard, or else. You can't upset me with a big brother parade!"

This so exactly described the line Derek had taken that he nearly stamped with rage. As he was wondering what to do next Graham's head appeared at a side window, signalling for peace and quiet. The head withdrew and in its place came a bundle, hanging on a string. Graham appeared again, and in a few seconds both boy and bundle issued from the window to drop silently to the ground.

"There's been no court order," persisted Derek, preparing for a strategic retreat. "I've as much right to look after the kid as what Dad 'as. And more than you can boast of. You're nothing but a . . ."

Mrs Collings attacked swiftly, and with such vigour that Derek fled. She pursued him to the end of her short path, then gave up the chase as quickly as she had begun it. A few seconds later she was chagrined to see Graham, carrying a large bundle, join his brother under the clump of plane trees behind the buildings. She watched the two boys move away;

they did not look back. Presently she returned to her kitchen, and thoughtfully went on with her cooking.

It was going to be very difficult, she saw clearly, to explain to Alf what had happened. There would be another row, but with luck he would come back too late to want to go out again after Graham. The soldier brother must be crazy. What would the kid do when he went back at the end of his leave? Well, it was none of her business. She couldn't care less, she told herself angrily, which of them had the boy. Give her a bit of a rest for a change, if he did stop away. If there had only been herself to think of she would have felt quite pleased the way things had gone, but Alf would be back, and Alf was not an easy man to guide through a crisis of this sort. Too violent, by half. Next thing she'd find herself out on her ear, and then what?

Mrs Collings stirred slowly, keeping her rage simmering all the time, too. She was determined to get in the first blows as soon as Mr Howard appeared. In that way, she thought, she might be able to steer him into acceptance of the situation. He could do what he liked the next morning, so long as he was back in good time. But she wasn't going to have her Sunday evening at the pictures put out for the sake of a couple of boys. Not she!

All the way back to Vincent Street Graham kept up a continuous chatter, in part from excitement, but chiefly from the pleasure of being again with Derek. Even his new changed life did not give him the sense of deep security he felt in his brother's company. His natural response was to pour out a long, involved account of all that had happened since the Sunday of Derek's last leave. All, that is, except the history of that night.

Derek did not press him for details. He understood the boy's reticence very well, and since the Marshmans had told him the substance of the story, he felt no need to enlarge his knowledge. The kid was well, a better colour and fatter than at any time since Stansford days, and that was enough. Let bygones be bygones.

They came to the house, but it still needed a quarter of an hour to opening time at the pubs. Derek wanted at all costs to avoid seeing his mother again that day. The first encounter had been too filled with bitterness and disgust. He saw that it would not be easy now to re-establish Graham in his own home, though he was determined to do it before he went back to Aldershot. Better to leave the whole discussion, the probable scene, until the next day, before he and the boy went off to Stansford. Then she could be thinking it over quietly while they were away and would no doubt come round to it in the evening. It had been plain earlier that she was prepared to do everything she could to spite Mrs Collings and annoy her defaulting husband. It should be easy to bring her round to his way of thinking.

"We'll go along to Wickings for a bob's worth," he said, as Graham hesitated by the steps of number eleven.

"I'll wait 'ere," said the boy resolutely.

"Don't you want your tea?"

"I'll wait."

Derek looked at him. Perhaps the walk had tired the child: certainly his face looked unusually pale just now, and only a minute since he had been thinking what a colour he had.

"What's up? Feeling bad?"

"Garn!"

The scorn was unconvincing, but Derek still mistook plain fear for illness. He made Graham sit down on the front-door steps, told him not to move till he came back, and went on alone.

He could not know what a dreadful significance the Wicking pair held for the boy. Mrs Marshman had not even mentioned their name to him. Why should she, when she still had no real knowledge, only a shrewd guess, how Graham had made his way into her shop-parlour on that eventful Sunday night. Derek could not know, and would not have understood, the dread in which his more imaginative brother now held the red-haired couple, a scorching fear of retaliation, and an undefined terror of the method by which it would be achieved. Not for nothing had he seen them emerge on Sundays,

spruce, neat, prosperous, and avid for the particular indulgences they sought. Without thinking about it, he understood the power of their controlled greed, recognizing an adult display of his own childish aggression, and rightly horrified by it. No inducement in the world, not even Derek's protection, would persuade him to go near their shop. In his daily visits to the Marshmans' establishment he always went down the street, and left again by the same route. Never once had he passed the yard gates, which were open every morning at that hour, waiting for the return of the fish van from Billingsgate.

Derek found only a small queue in the shop. As usual, he joined the line, that his turn to be served would fall to Reg, rather than Mabel.

"Back again?" the former exclaimed as Derek gave his order.

"That's right."

"Stopping long?"

"Forty-eight."

"Don't give you much opportunity, do it? Trust them!"

He did not enlarge upon nor even clarify this remark, but Derek understood it well enough. Deliberate frustration by those in charge, a universal condition of life in all its aspects. Not that the Wickings suffered much, by all accounts.

"Got your new car?" he asked, following the train of his thoughts.

The brother and sister exchanged glances.

"Not yet," said Mabel, leaning across to him. "No priority, see."

"Thought you might 'ave."

"Whyever?"

Derek did not say, hardly knew what he really meant. Only that he had a feeling the Wickings were privileged people. It was his own mild response to the power in them that so terrified Graham.

"Stopping at your ma's?" asked Miss Wicking, who by now had no customers to serve.

"Yeah."

"You won't see much of young Graham, then?"

"He's with me now. Waiting outside."

"D'you mean you've got 'im back? Did they let you?"

"Didn't ask."

Derek's replies were spoken in an increasingly brusque manner. But the Wickings saw an opportunity to learn more of something that had puzzled them. They closed in on their prey, red heads close together, poked forward across the frying vats, thin pale faces twitching with eagerness.

"We 'eard 'e was on probation—for breaking into Marshmans."

"You heard wrong."

"Fancy! Did Mr Marshman say why 'e was there, then?"

"Near enough, 'e did. The kid was scared of the storm."

"D'you mean to tell me there was no trouble with the police after all?"

"No trouble. Only he's bin stopping up at Dad's, on the Common. I'm getting 'im out of that."

"You don't say!"

Derek held out his hand for his parcel of fish. He had had enough of their curiosity; he did not understand the reason for it, but he knew that it contained no warmth of concern, either for Graham or himself.

He found the boy still sitting on the step where he had left him and was touched by this new obedience. Graham jumped up immediately.

"Skate," said Derek, smiling. "You like skate, don't you?"

"Not 'alf!"

All the boy's relief and affection were in the stressed syllables of his answer.

The Wickings sounded one another cautiously that evening on the subject of Derek's action over his young brother.

"Marshmans ain't told 'im nothing. That's easy to see."

"And for why? They must've known where 'e sprung from that night. Our yard's about the only way 'e could've fetched up in their back garden."

"Too right, dear." Mabel Wicking patted her high front

hair. "D'you know what I'm thinking, remembering all along 'ow the police were two hours at their place on the Monday?"

"Two hours? Four bleeding hours is more like it," her brother corrected her.

"Never mind, exactly. What were they doing, I ask you?"

"We decided that," said Reg. "No need to go over it all again. They found what 'e took, and they were looking for where it come from. Of course what with the drought, and the cats lying over the flower beds everywhere, they'd 'ave a job to find footmarks out of our place, or in their garden. But they'd 'ave to think of it."

Reg nodded.

"You'd 'ave thought," he said slowly, "they'd 'ave come round to us after."

It was Mabel's turn to agree.

"I don't believe they said a word to Marshman, nor to Mrs M. For fear they'd tip us off. If they 'ad, I don't mind betting Derek would 'ave heard the complain's. Besides, they give the nipper a paper round."

"I always wondered about that."

"Either the Marshmans don't know nothing," said Miss Wicking firmly, "or they're deeper than wot I've ever given them credit for."

There was a long silence in the room behind the shop. Mabel began to pile the supper plates; she considered the subject closed. But her brother had ideas.

"I've a good mind to contact Charlie," he said. "About time we had a little palaver again. It's all very well 'im running the depot end, but the risk there's negligible. Only 'as it in a few hours, early Sunday morning."

"That's right."

"I've a good mind to go up to the 'Bear' for a chat with 'im and 'Arry. Responsibilities ought to be shared; that's democracy, that is."

They both laughed at this display of wit. After another short silence Mabel said, "I can take care of the boy, and turn 'im to some use, too. I'll fix 'im."

"Better be careful while Derek's around."

"I wasn't born yesterday," said Miss Wicking scornfully.

A little later Mr Wicking slipped up to 'The Bear and Pole' for a decorous pint of old brown. His sister stayed at home. It wouldn't do to advertise themselves. Besides, they had a reputation to keep up. Business depended a lot on reputation.

XII

THE two Howard boys travelled to Stansford the next morning by motor coach, arriving in the corner bay of the new bus station a good hour before the time Derek had said he would reach the Trents' house. This he had planned deliberately, because he wanted to see the general effect on Graham of a return to his wartime home.

The bus station naturally brought out exclamations of surprise and wonder. It was smashing, it was super. Graham insisted upon walking along all the queue-runs to look at the notices about the buses and the swinging boards with their numbers and routes. Above all, he insisted upon visiting the small ice-cream kiosk at the exit on the corner of the High Street. Though the dinner hour was near, for Mrs Trent had asked them to come not later than half-past one, to share the family Sunday meal, he bought himself an ice-cream wafer to suck as they went along.

But the boy's enthusiasm did not last. Derek took him to the towpath to follow the same approach to Colebrook Road he had himself taken on his former visit. But Graham's interest declined rapidly as they left the High Street behind them to move out on to the desolate flats near the gas-works. Even the river running by, fringed with rough grass and reeds, made no particular impression on him. He moved listlessly, dragging his feet, and complaining from time to time that they would have done better to get another bus. It was clear that his outlook had become completely urban, with a deep-rooted dislike of walking for more than five minutes at a time.

Derek was deeply exasperated. He had looked forward to

seeing his old picture of the place re-established, himself strolling along, dreamily looking for objects on the ground of interest or profit, while Graham ran up and down the river's edge crying out his excitement and pleasure when he caught, or even saw, a small fish in the muddy water. But Graham was not playing his part. He was not playing at all; just mooching along with his hands in the pockets of his shorts, his jacket unbuttoned and his Sunday tie screwed over to the side of his neck.

Hiding his disappointment with an effort that did not improve his temper, Derek quickened his pace. Graham at first made no effort to follow. But when he saw that he was being left behind, and no protesting cries brought any response from his brother's quick-striding figure, he broke into an unwilling trot. So they went on, Derek always ahead, keeping up a pace he had learned in the Army, and Graham behind, sometimes running, sometimes stationary, sometimes calling out in protest, sometimes keeping a sulky silence. They crossed the main road in the same order, turned up Colebrook Road, and arrived at the corner of Anvil Crescent. Here Derek waited for the younger boy to draw level.

"Pull your tie straight," he ordered curtly. "And button your coat."

"It's too hot," said Graham.

"You do as I say, and buck up about it, or I'll give you something to hurry you."

In this way and in this unamiable mood the brothers presented themselves at the front door of 'Monteve.'

Marion let them in. She had prepared for this moment ever since Derek's letter arrived saying he would bring Graham to see them next Sunday. She had not forgotten the impression Derek had made on her before; and while, in her memory of him, his good looks had become clearer and finer, until he had grown to be almost the equal of her favourite film star, his manner of speech, his shyness and diffidence—in fact, his whole real self—had grown dim. She was expecting quite a different person.

However, here was the real Derek on the doorstep, and with

him, to complete her mental confusion, a thin, leggy boy, indistinguishable from the Derek of her first acquaintance. All her gracious words of welcome left her mind on the instant. She stared at the two of them, wildly trying to decide which was the stranger and which the familiar friend. She could think of nothing better to say than "This is never Graham!" To which foolish remark Derek answered, smiling, "Who else d'you think it is?"

She found it impossible to explain, so she blushed and asked them to come in, calling out from the hall, "It's them, Mum. Shall I take them in the front room?"

A muffled voice answered from the kitchen, so Marion led them into the crowded front sitting-room, which she had decorated with two vases of flowers, and where they found Mr Trent, placidly reading a Sunday newspaper. He was in his shirt-sleeves and a pair of old trousers. He greeted them without getting up.

"Bin gardening," he said briefly. "No time for it in the week. Be at it again this afternoon. You'll 'ave to excuse the get-up."

"That's all right," said Derek awkwardly.

"Grown, the both of you," went on Mr Trent appraisingly, looking them up and down. "The nipper's about the same as you were when you first come 'ere."

"Isn't he?" said Marion eagerly. Her father had noticed the same thing, then; it freed her tongue. "I thought directly I saw them at the gate, why, it's Derek all over again. Family likeness, I suppose," she ended quickly, blushing again because her outburst had sounded so foolish in her own ears.

But Derek was delighted. No one had ever before said that there was the slightest resemblance between them. It pleased him too to think that she remembered how he had looked so long ago.

"All boys that age are much of a muchness," laughed Mr Trent. "Sit down and make yourselves at home."

"Can I go in the garden?" asked Graham suddenly. He had been looking about him with growing interest and had just reached the point, in a mounting excitement, where strangeness began to give way to recognition.

"Later on," said Marion kindly. "You'd wake the Terror if you went out now, and we'd have no peace till he was fed."

"Nice way to talk of her little brother, eh?" said Mr Trent.

"I'll go and help Mum," Marion went on, very red in the face. "Graham, you can come and say how-d'you-do to Auntie."

The boy hung back. The interloper in the garden, rightly named, he thought, had quenched his enthusiasm. Derek saw what he took for shyness and offered himself in his place.

"Oh, all right," said Marion, as carelessly as she could. She tried to hold the door of the room open for him, and he tried to let her go out first, so they jostled in the opening and each felt the impact with a pleasure charged with irritation.

"Pardon," Derek muttered in the hall.

"Granted," said Marion lightly, assuming ascendancy in a flash. The next minute Derek found himself inside the kitchen door with Mrs Trent's arms round his neck and her warm kiss on his cheek.

His answering hug, releasing, as it did, the tension of years, made her gasp and push him away, laughing as she did so.

"That's enough of it! My ribs nearly went that time. It's Graham's turn now. Well, I never! Look at the height of him."

But Graham hung back: he was ashamed of his brother's demonstration, and had no wish to evoke the same sort of tolerant, affectionate banter. Locked in four years of distrust, and armoured by his constant defiance of his world, he stared coolly at Mrs Trent, recognizing her as a former friend, but totally unmoved by the fact.

"He's shy," said Derek, to excuse him.

"He never used to be," Marion said, laughing.

"They go through stages," agreed Mrs Trent. She understood the boy's aloofness, if not its cause.

"Take him out in the garden," she continued, "and let me get on with my dinner."

"Can't I help?" Marion urged. "They know their way."

"They ought to. Graham, you go and see if you can find old Porter. You remember Porter, don't you?"

Without a word the boy slipped through the back door and was gone. Derek laughed self-consciously, offered again to help Marion, was again refused, and finally made his own clumsy deliberate exit.

He paused for a minute outside the door, before turning away along the path. For, comfortably settled in the angle of the house, where the loose shade of a laburnum took off the full heat of the sun, was a smart cream-coloured perambulator, with the hood half up.

He tiptoed across to it, and after looking round to see that he was not watched, turned back the white blanket. He had time to see that Mrs Trent's son already possessed a head of hair as dark as Marion's before the air on his cheek made the baby wrinkle up his face and move his head from side to side. Derek let the blanket fall back into place, and crept away in guilty silence.

He found Graham at the bottom of the garden. The boy was kneeling on the ground with his arms round Porter's neck, and his face pressed against the old dog's muzzle. Far from resenting this fierce embrace, Porter stood stiff and patient, moving his tail gently from side to side. Derek stood also, until, looking up for a moment, Graham saw him. At once he pushed Porter away with a rough gesture that made him growl. The boy scrambled to his feet.

"You ought to go careful with him now," Derek said slowly. "He's nearly stone-blind. Cataract."

Graham knelt again, trying gently to turn the dog's face towards him, to look at the afflicted eyes for himself. But Porter was bewildered by these sudden changes. So he backed away, and then, shaking off the boy's hands, trotted up the path to the house and disappeared inside it.

"He remembered you at the first," said Derek softly.

Graham shrugged his shoulders, kicking with his heel at a projecting stone in the path.

Dinner passed off successfully. Derek felt thoroughly at home among the Trents and though Graham hardly spoke a word, the boy's manners had improved a good deal since he went to

live with his father and Mrs Collings. He ate quietly, finishing what had been put on his plate, and even passing things politely when he was asked to do so. Derek had no reason to be ashamed of him.

Afterwards, while Marion and Mrs Trent cleared away, Mr Trent took the two boys back to the front room. He found magazines for them both and himself returned to his pipe and the newspaper. He was no conversationalist and did not intend to make any change in his Sunday routine for the benefit of two such old friends. Particularly as they knew his habits, having been carefully trained in the years gone by to respect them.

Derek was vaguely cast down by all this. He expected rather more interest to be shown in his immediate past and in his present occupation. But Graham sank himself in a magazine story, seemingly quite content to be ignored. His total indifference was very disturbing to his brother. Somewhere deep inside him nostalgic grief began to mount, seeping into the springs of his pleasure. He turned over the pages of his magazine with listless fingers, waiting for the noise of pots and pans to subside in the kitchen so that he could go out and secure Mrs Trent for a long confiding of his various troubles.

Presently Marion came into the room. He looked up quickly.

"Auntie having a rest?" he asked. "Or can I go to her?"

Marion blushed deeply.

"She's seeing to David. You'll have to wait."

"Seeing to who?"

"David. The Terror. Our baby."

He understood, cursing himself for his slowness. Babies took a lot of seeing to. Perhaps Auntie was even feeding the brat herself. He felt mildly disgusted at the thought. She was too old for such an act to be thought of sentimentally. Madonnas had to be ageless to make their proper appeal. Removing his now embarrassed eyes from Marion's face he went back to his magazine, wondering how soon and with what excuse he could get away altogether from 'Monteve.'

For it had come to that. The visit was a failure, as far as

the future was concerned. They were all centred on the new arrival; they had no time for anyone outside their circle, now magically complete. Certainly no place for Graham, who in his turn was as far removed from them as if his childhood had never existed. He had tried to stretch himself as a bridge between the Trents and Graham, but the span was too great, and the whole design an illusion.

When Mrs Trent had suckled her son, washed him and made him comfortable, stowed him again in his pram and wheeled him, limp with repletion, to another shady spot in the garden, she went upstairs to change her dress. That done she called Derek to her in the back sitting-room.

"Take Graham up to the playground and give 'im a turn on the swings," she called out to Marion. "Can't keep 'im stewing indoors now the sun's come out. What's the use of 'im coming down to the country if 'e doesn't get the air?"

It was the last thing Marion wanted to do, but she dared not argue with her mother on Sunday when her father was there to hear her, so she made a face for Derek's benefit, and calling to the younger boy, moved slowly to the front gate, not bothering to wait for him. Graham glanced at Derek, accepted his nod with an impassive face, and followed her.

Mrs Trent watched Derek closely as he came into the back sitting-room. He had changed, she thought, not altogether for the better. It was easy to see he was worried, poor lad. But he was still her boy, her strong, square, good lad. She smiled at him until he had to find an answering smile. Then she asked to hear all about it.

When the tale was done they sat in silence, Derek staring out of the window. It was just as he expected. All the sympathy in the world, but no solution. This family was not his family; nothing could make it so, certainly not now. A couple of years back, perhaps, when the essential gap was still unfilled. But not now. Never again.

"You'll have to wait till you can give 'im a home of your own," said Mrs Trent kindly. "You're doing well, by all accounts. You'll soon be in a position to do it."

"With another eighteen months and more in the Army?"

"It's all experience," said Mrs Trent.

"Not my kind. I never have enough to do."

"They all say that at first."

"I've had the best part of six months. You don't know."

She did not, and she saw he was in a mood to reject any help she could offer. She sighed.

"We all get pushed around these days," she said. "Queues and rations and regulations and that. Dad can't make head nor tail of the most of them. The only thing is not to worry. Children grow up and you can't make regulations against that. And people change their minds. You will yourself, I shouldn't wonder."

She knew she was not doing any good, so she stopped trying to explain the things for which she had no words, only a conviction of truth.

"Have they gone far?" Derek asked.

He meant Marion and Graham. Mrs Trent understood him.

"I suppose you've got a bus to catch," she said. "They're up at the playground. It was levelled off on the site of Pyrford House. You remember, the one that caught the rocket bomb. It was for demolition anyhow, at the end of the war. Those evacuees had left it a year, on account of the damp. The Council levelled it off and put up swings and that."

"I'd better go up and get Graham," Derek said.

"Don't come back out of your way, if you'll miss your bus," Mrs Trent went on. "They only run at the hour."

She did not want to see Graham again, then. Why should she? He held out his hand, thanking her in a stumbling speech, for everything.

"It's been a real treat seeing you again, dear," said Mrs Trent. "You must come over from Aldershot one evening, before long. Don't forget, now."

They shook hands this time, warmly, cordially, with the past lying dead at their feet.

XIII

THE two boys were back in Wandsworth by five o'clock. It was an afternoon very like the day before: clouds had covered the sun and a dry wind blew the summer dust of the streets into their faces. In all the corners of the pavement and gutter, trapped there by the wind, dirty newspaper sheets and cigarette cartons flapped and struggled. Apart from this accustomed litter, the town was very empty.

Derek turned off Wandsworth High Street as usual, but he had not gone ten yards before he realized that Graham was no longer beside him. He turned abruptly. The boy was there at the corner, nervously scuffing his feet on the pavement, but not moving along it.

"Buck up!" called out Derek. "What's up with you?"

"I'm not coming." Graham's voice was distant, impersonal.

"What d'you mean, not coming? You've got all your things at home."

"I'll get Bob to bring them up."

Bob was a friend of Graham's who lived in Vincent Street; a large, silent lad two years older than he.

"You do as I tell you."

"I can't," said Graham, his voice more far away than ever. "I'd be scared she'd keep me there. I'm all right on the Common. It'd be different if you was 'ome. I won't stay after you've left. I won't!"

Derek's many disappointing encounters of the last twenty-four hours were suddenly too much for him. There was something in Graham's attitude, an alert defiance, a cool reckoning of chances, a certain air of conviction, that defeated the older boy. Spiritually in agreement, he yet forced himself to make conditions. By this time he had walked back to Graham's side, the latter not moving to meet him.

"All right. You can go back if you take your things."

"She'll try to keep me."

"I won't let her."

Graham's immediate trust was complete reward, Derek thought, for his forbearance. He said gently, "You'll have to come in to pack your things."

"Will she be there?"

"It doesn't matter. She'll be in her room, most-like."

"Don't say, will you?"

"No, I won't say. You pack your things and I'll keep guard. I'll take you straight up to the Common after."

"Won't we have tea?"

"No." Derek's face set in hard lines. "You can't have it both ways, you know."

Graham made a parcel of his things. As he was wearing his suit, it was a smaller bundle than the one he had brought from the prefab. Derek watched him, realizing for the first time how quick and thorough Graham had been over his get-away the day before. Not only had he timed it perfectly, but he had remembered to pack his Sunday clothes for the Stansford expedition, and had packed them complete, without forgetting a single item. The kid had a head on him and no mistake.

"Tell Dad it was all my fault," he said, suddenly fearful of the reception Graham would have at the prefab.

"Trust Mrs Collings to have plugged that one," the boy grinned. He added, in a soothing tone beyond his years, "You needn't worry on my account. Dad's all right."

Derek said nothing. At that time he held a very different view of his father. Taking the boy's parcel from him, he tucked it under his arm and led the way downstairs again.

They reached the Common all too soon for Derek. But he did not want to linger.

"Here you are," he said roughly. "Go along in. I'm not coming any further."

"When will you be back?"

"God knows."

"Send us a line when you're coming."

Derek understood. Graham intended to join him the next time without being fetched.

"I might."

They looked at one another.

"Porter's got a very *old* dog," said Graham slowly. "Do they all get that cataract?"

"Mostly they do."

Neither of them felt like saying goodbye. Graham began to walk towards the prefab. When his small figure was halfway between it and the road where Derek stood, the latter turned abruptly and moved away down the hill.

Graham did not look back. From time to time he shifted his bundle to the other hand. When he reached the prefab he leaned against the wall for a few minutes, listening for voices within. All was quiet. They did not seem to be there, but when he went on to the back door, he found it was not locked. Very slowly and reluctantly he went into the house.

Derek continued down the hill until he reached the High Street again, but here he paused. He did not want to go back to Vincent Street, and it was still early, barely six. He thought he might go up to Wimbledon and take Netta out to the pictures. It would take his mind off Graham, if nothing else. But he had to acknowledge to himself that he was not all that keen on seeing the girl. Her fair prettiness had been outdone that day by Marion Trent's more positive, though still undeveloped charms. He did not attribute his lack of enthusiasm to this cause, however. He simply felt "brassed off," seeing no need to justify his mood.

When he reached the house he found that his girl and her mother were out. Mr Smith opened the door to him.

"Oh, it's you, Derek, is it?"

"Yes, Mr Smith. Is Netta there?"

"You're unlucky, I'm afraid. She and her mother have gone to Hampton Court."

"Oh, I see."

He began to back away. Something in his disconsolate face touched Mr Smith's dry little heart, so that he said, "Don't go right away. Come in and have a smoke first. I'll make you a cup of tea if you like. I've got the kettle on. I was going to make a pot for myself."

Derek found this hospitality from such a source rather

overwhelming. Muttering untruthfully that he had had his tea, he followed his host into the room the Smiths called the lounge.

"Did you write?" Mr Smith asked, when they were both seated. "Netta never said anything about you coming."

"No. I didn't write. I didn't know I'd be able to come up."

As Mr Smith continued to look inquiringly at him, Derek described his visit to Stansford with Graham, and, as vaguely as possible, the reason for his parting with his little brother at the prefab.

"Netta told us something of the trouble," Mr Smith said calmly. "The war was responsible for breaking up many homes."

"This wasn't the war," answered Derek sullenly. "She's always been like it."

"Meaning your mother? Then if it wasn't the war," said Mr Smith, breaking out into his favourite lecture, "which was a product of this civilization, then it was the result of living in a so-called civilized city." He laid down his pipe, turning towards Derek who sat, an astonished and unwilling audience, on the edge of the sofa opposite him.

"Lawlessness in the midst of rules," said Mr Smith. "Chaos in a framework of order, poverty in plenty, and grab, grab, grab, everywhere you go, no matter if it's rich or poo. That does it. People 'ave more money than ever they 'ad, and it's less use to them than the dole was in the slump. I'm a working man, always 'ave been. I belong to a big business house. And what do I see there? Me and three others know our job, but we aren't getting any younger. Where are the smart young men that ought to be learning the craft? Sitting up in the accountant's office in white collars totting up figures. Where are the girls that used to sew for us? Sitting up in the same office falling over one another's high heels, not one of them knowing what it's all about, and no one to tell 'em. But drawing their salaries. Oh, yes. D'you know what I feel sometimes?" Mr Smith leaned closer to Derek, puffing thick clouds from his pipe as his oration got hold of him. "I feel as if I was working my guts out on the upholstery just for the

privilege of pulling along a cageful of those secretary birds up in the office. And their cage is hitched on to a whole string of cages up in Whitehall, all full of secretary birds I'm sweating my guts out to pull along behind me. And what do those birds do that I'm hauling? Just drop paper forms out of their cages; I'm snowed under with the paper they shower out. I can't hardly move my feet in it because it's that thick. So I'm in a kind of cage too, going round and round, hauling the secretary birds in their cages. Secretary birds!" He paused to give a little barking laugh. "Ever been to the Zoo?"

"No," said Derek. He was awed by this outburst, and bewildered by such a flow of words from a man usually so silent.

"I've a good mind," said Mr Smith, "to clear right out of it."

"Retire?" asked Derek.

His host gave an indignant snort.

"What d'you mean, retire? Do I look the age to retire?"

Derek thought he did, but it was evident Mr Smith would not welcome this answer, so he said, "No, of course not."

"No—I should think not indeed. What I had in mind was a little business of my own. . . . Not a word of this to the missus or Netta, mind."

Derek nodded his head knowingly.

"The work's there to be done, you see," went on Mr Smith. "And don't I know it? But these regulations! Nothing but wait, wait, wait. Can't get the materials, see. If a bit of cloth comes in, we can't get the springs or the tape or the frames or the tacks, or something. Always some blessed thing missing, so we can't get the job started. *We* get fed-up, the *customer* gets fed-up, the *firm's* so fed-up they talk of going out of business—on the upholstery repairs side, I mean. Not worth the fuss and bother. I'd like to build up a little business of my own," said Mr Smith dreamily, seeming to ignore the problems he would then have to face himself. "Like my Uncle Bernard 'ad at Ramsgate. Independent, see?" He dropped his voice nearly to a whisper. "And not in London, nor anywhere near it. And no cages full of secretary birds. My own perch and no cage-bars, see?"

He nodded his small neat head a good many times at Derek, who, not knowing what else to do, nodded back, feeling rather silly.

"You need capital, though," said Mr Smith. "That's where the trouble lies. And you can't save these days, what with the price of everything and the income tax and that. But where there's a will there's a way."

Getting no response to this, he repeated the last phrase. Derek had to nod again. Mr Smith seemed to realize now that his visitor was becoming quite mystified, and knowing that he could not with any sort of discretion enlighten him, he applied the brakes to his confessional impulse and got to his feet.

"That kettle must be boiling its head off," he said. "I could do with a wet between now and opening time."

Derek left the Smith home with no very clear idea of what he meant to do next. He had not managed to get away until his host too was ready to leave. Then he found himself at the door, with Mr Smith, very tidy and insignificant in his dark suit and black bowler, standing at his elbow.

"I'd ask you to join me at 'The Bear and Pole,' " he said, "but I've an appointment there with a friend. Business comes first, eh, even on a Sunday?"

He laughed, and Derek tried to join in, but he did not really understand the nature of Mr Smith's joke, and was, besides, put out by his reference to the one pub he himself would never enter if he could help it. He did manage to thank Mr Smith for his tea, however, and the little man hurried away with his short, tireless step, feeling more kindly disposed towards Derek than ever before. The boy had all the usual awkwardness of his age, he thought, but he took in what was said to him, and he didn't argue or interrupt as the women at home always did. It was a long time since Mr Smith had been able to hold forth as he wished. It had done him good: made everything a lot clearer in his mind. He saw just what it was he really intended to get out of his association with Charlie Bentham. Capital. What he needed to set up

his own little business. When Charlie had served his turn, he'd drop him. Sooner, if the balloon looked like going up. You couldn't be too careful. In the meantime, he'd take a good look at the adverts in the trade journals: a seaside place, by preference, he told himself, remembering 'again his Uncle Bernard's establishment at Ramsgate. Take up fishing in his old age, perhaps. With Netta to keep house. Nothing so fancy as their present home, and if the old battleaxe didn't like it, she could stay where she was and good riddance.

Derek's thoughts pursued no like ~~orderly~~ sequence as he walked slowly from the Smiths' house to Putney Heath. Mr Smith's diatribes had not touched his mind. But they had confirmed and strengthened the revolt in his heart. He felt the bonds of his modern citizenship as never before. For the first time in his life he looked closely at the faces of the people he passed, finding in them nothing to admire, much to despise and hate. Once when his path cut across the track on which a party of young men and girls was strolling, he tripped on a stone and lurched into one of the latter. She gave a loud, artificial scream and her boy-friend squared up to Derek pugnaciously. In a surge of quick anger, the latter rounded on him, his heart exulting in the promise of some straightforward action. But his opponent, meeting the blazing blue eyes, recoiled from them as quickly as he had advanced, and assuming a protective cynicism, put up his hands, saying, "O.K., soldier. I've a weak heart."

His companions laughed immoderately. Derek, the moment of release fading, was left uncertain of himself, shy, and more than ever resentful. He turned away with the mocking laughter mounting behind him.

It was soon after this, and while the memory of it still rankled, that he saw Netta. She was not with Mrs Smith at Hampton Court; she was with a man, here on Putney Heath. They lay in the shadow of some bushes, arms enlaced. Her new friend had on a green sports shirt and light fawn trousers belted round his waist. His arms were skinny, with big joints at the elbows and wrists, and his thin shoulder blades stuck out under the fabric of the shirt. He sprawled over Netta like

some hard, leggy insect trying to climb across an obstacle.

After the shock of recognition, Derek, walking on without looking back, was astonished to find how little he cared. It was not the end of an episode; that had happened, he now saw, the last time they had met, when he had occupied the place this thin beggar now held. Good luck to them. She had never been his type, really. Too la-di-da, too prettified. He wanted something solid. Inconsequently, his mind suddenly presented him with a picture of Mrs Trent, stout, smiling, with the new baby's legs turned up in her big hand, while she spread a clean napkin under his little pink bottom.

Derek's face burned under its. ~~was~~ Certainly he didn't want Mrs Trent. The indecency he had just offered himself prevented his thoughts from moving on to the next natural goal, Marion Trent herself. Instead, he shut his mind to his dissatisfactions, directing himself off the Heath, and towards the houses and the pubs. A drink and a sandwich, he thought, and then hit the road for Aldershot. If he wasn't lucky, he might not get down that night. Better be thinking of getting a move on.

That he did not do this, that he was only just in time to appear, pale-faced and vacant-eyed, on duty the next morning, was not a question of luck. He knew what he was doing. He risked overstaying his leave deliberately. He took the risk to silence the unbearable desolate cries of his loneliness.

At the pub where he got his drink and his sandwich he found himself standing tightly wedged between two sets of friends, all talking and laughing in their respective groups. The barmaid saw his predicament and his shyness and threw out a handful of remarks to him, when she had time, which was seldom. At last, feeling his isolation was becoming ridiculous, he edged his way from the bar, and took his drink to a far corner where there was a small table and several chairs, all unoccupied because the light there was poor and the furniture mean and undusted.

The barmaid saw him go; she was all for doing people a good turn if she could. So her next cheerful remark and

significant wink sent two pairs of mascara'd eyes in Derek's direction.

"Not my cup of tea, dear. All yours."

"Well, I don't know, I'm sure."

Nevertheless, a few seconds later, Derek found his seclusion shared, and later on, on leaving the pub, was still not alone. He knew the comfort he was offered was false, but he was too parched to refuse it. And then it was his first experience of the kind, as hitherto he had fought shy of a professional setting for his first adventure. But he made an unlooked-for success of it; the whole thing was much easier to achieve than he had expected. In his simple, uncomplicated way he was grateful. Quite touchingly so, his companion thought, as she kissed him goodbye with unusual warmth. He was genuinely grateful: she had cleaned out his wallet, but she had cleared his mind of its rancour and his heart of its pride. He saw his mother and his father in a new light; he was not ready yet to forgive them, perhaps less ready than before. But he had come a little closer to the real world, in which they lived and grubbed their way along. He had discovered a little more of its immense complexity, and was both humbled and exalted.

BETWEEN LEAVES

XIV

THE school holidays began, and Graham Howard found himself with a month of freedom and no settled activity to occupy him except the paper round.

Mrs Collings resented the school holiday; as usual she took no pains to conceal her feelings.

"Four weeks! It's a positive disgrace!" she kept exclaiming, day by day. "Don't think of the parents, do they?"

"The teachers need a bit of a rest," said Mr Howard mildly, on the first occasion.

"We need a break, too," put in Graham.

"None of your cheek, now," Mrs Collings told him. "You give an opinion when it's called for, and not before."

"Leave 'im alone," Mr Howard ordered. "They give 'im a good report this time. Want to try 'im for a scholarship to the Grammar. If 'e's not too old to sit for it. You'd like that, wouldn't you, son?"

Graham made a face of indifference. Not for the world would he show Mrs Collings that he had any serious intention whatever. Of course he meant to get to the Grammar School: Mr Marshman had been responsible for this ambition, with his talk about science and the things it taught you. Mr Marshman had a great reverence for science. He spoke of it in the hushed voice his own parents had used for religious discussion. The aquarium was to him a symbol and daily reminder of the great mysteries of science; its mechanically maintained balance of life between plant and animal engaged both his wonder and his faith. All this he had conveyed to Graham, whose active mind promptly demanded a fuller satisfaction. The boy wanted to know as well how it all worked. Mr Marshman had theories, but it was obvious that his exact knowledge was very limited. So Graham was determined to find a richer source.

But Mrs Collings was not to hear of his desires. He had not told even Derek. He could trust no one with his inmost feelings. But during the last few weeks he had astonished the teachers at his school, where the headmaster had put his name forward for a free place.

"You'd like to get a scholarship, wouldn't you?" repeated Mr Howard.

"I wouldn't mind."

"Then you bloody well ought to. It's up to you to better yourself."

"Like to see 'im in a office, I suppose?" said Mrs Collings, sniffing.

"I don't want no office," said Graham.

"What do you want, then?"

The boy shut his mouth tightly and would not answer. He did not want to "be" anything. He wanted to "know": chiefly about fish, and how they managed to live in their strange surroundings; but also about other live things, how trees grew, and the mysterious processes of his own body.

"Four weeks!" Mrs Collings grumbled. "In and out all day."

Her criticism was unfair: Graham was hardly ever at home except for meals. If she had been more observant she would have noticed that after a time he was often late for these, and even went out again before he had finished. That was on his plate.

It was Graham's paper round that gave Miss Wicking her bright idea. As she explained to her brother she had suspected it from the first, and later saw a way to use it to their advantage.

They had to change their system. After the night of the thunderstorm it was not safe for the customers to come to the shop door after closing time. They might be watched. The stuff could come in just the same. In point of fact, there seemed to be no alternative method of getting it from the depot. The Cats' Home expected to have the offal every Sunday, and Harry Biggs had no objection to taking the van along. He got his rake-off and seemed to need it, too. Not

careful in business like his father. Too many irons in the fire, Harry had. A bit of a wide boy.

Miss Wicking chose her moment carefully. When the school holidays began Graham Howard came a little later to get the papers for his round. Only a few minutes, but it meant he had relaxed a bit. He was not in such a hurry to get on to school. She knew he wanted to please the Marshmans, and for that reason was never too late to get the papers to the customers by eight, or eight-thirty at the latest. She made no attempt to interfere with the round, but she took to sweeping her yard out every other morning, about the time Graham left the shop. And as he got on the bicycle and rode away she paused in her sweeping to say good morning to him.

Graham ignored her the first two days. The morning after that she was down on the pavement sweeping the dirt out into the gutter. And she pushed her broom across the path of the bicycle as he was mounting, looking him very straight in the eye and saying good morning as usual.

"Good morning," Graham answered between his teeth. He had to keep them shut to prevent them chattering. His heart was beating so fast he felt dizzy; there was no power in his legs.

Miss Wicking moved her broom and he shot away on his mission. This time when he returned the yard gates were closed, giving him no relief. But when he thought it over during the course of that day he only found it more disturbing than ever. He was sure a person with Miss Wicking's sharp, pale face and startling hair would never be without a motive in all she did. His terror increased as she intended it should.

She waited for a week and then she struck. Graham found her, as usual, sweeping her yard when he left on his round. But when he came back to the shop she was still there, brushing over the sides of the van. He put his bicycle away and spoke to the Marshmans and then left, but she was still there leaning on her broom now in the gateway, fixing him with her cold eyes.

"Here a minute, young Graham," she said. She spoke softly, but her voice cut into his mind like a steel blade.

He walked towards her, and as he advanced she moved away so that he had to keep walking. When he was inside the yard she began to close the gates.

Graham made a convulsive movement. He would have been through them in a flash, but he heard her speak again.

"Want me to call a copper?" she said.

Her tone was quite casual, almost as if she were offering him a sweet or asking the time of day. But he knew at once that she had discovered the truth. He took refuge in silence.

"That's right," she said. "You best say nothing. Now or any time."

She put a bony hand on his shoulder, at which he twisted himself away sharply. She could threaten, but he would not let her touch him. He followed her, walking a step or two behind.

Passing the van which stood at the side of the yard, Miss Wicking led the way to the storehouse, opening the door when she got there. The shelves were covered with boxes of fish for the day's frying.

Graham hung back, ignoring the finger that beckoned.

"Come on. You know your way, don't you?"

"No, I never."

"Oh, yes, you do. Don't you lie to me."

He went on reluctantly. As he crossed the threshold Miss Wicking shot out a skinny arm to ~~seize him~~ again by the shoulder. With the other hand she pulled the door shut. The storehouse darkened; the only light came through the small dirty window above the slab.

"Now listen to me. You know what you saw and what you took. Where did it go?"

"If you don't take your 'ands off of me," said Graham desperately, "Gawd 'elp you!"

Miss Wicking was not impressed. She shook him lightly.

"None of that, now. You come in 'ere, which was trespassing and you stole—you know what. Where did it go?"

Graham stared at her, silent, quaking in his shoes.

"If you won't say," whispered Miss Wicking, "I'll leave you in 'ere to make up your mind while I call the police."

"They took it," Graham burst out. "They took it out of my pocket. They never asked where it come from. They thought I got it at Marshmans."

"Did you say you got it at Marshmans?"

"I never said nothing."

"Did you want them to think it come from Marshmans?"

"No. I wasn't going to tell them anything. They can do their own dirty work."

It was a phrase he had heard all his life, when any trouble was discussed. We wash our hands of it: they can do their own dirty work

"I could tell them," said Miss Wicking thoughtfully.

"But you wouldn't. You 'ad the stuff in the first place."

He felt her stinging palm on his cheek the next instant. Then she was moving to the door.

"I warned you," she said. "Now you can stop 'ere a bit and cool off."

He knew he could not endure to be shut in with the dead fish and the flies. He would throw up, he would scream, he would faint, he would go mad, it would kill him.

"They never asked me," he repeated, beginning to whimper. "Cross my heart, they didn't."

Miss Wicking turned back from the door

"If I don't tell, will you do something for me?"

"What is it?"

"You deliver papers to one or two friends of mine. Will you take them their fish with the papers? It'd save us delivering, or them coming down for it."

"I can't make the bike smell fishy. Mrs Marshman wouldn't stand for it."

"I'll wrap it up well," said Miss Wicking. "I promise the parcels won't smell of fish."

No more they will, thought Graham, because they won't be fish at all, they'll be meat, black-market meat. He hesitated.

"We'll give you something for your trouble," said Miss Wicking in a sensible, business voice. "Couldn't expect you to work for nothing. 'Ave you got a money-box?"

"Yes."

"That's right. Saving up for anything?"

"Yes."

He would not tell her he was saving up for an aquarium of his own. She could mind her own ruddy business.

"That's right. Always save a bit for a rainy day. You never know when you'll need it."

She had opened the door now. Graham shot past her into the yard.

"Call in 'ere on your way out tomorrow," she said, unfastening the yard gates for him. "I'll 'ave the parcels ready for you."

He ran off up the road without looking back. Reg Wicking joined his sister at the gate.

"What's to stop 'im going straight to the Police Station. You can't tell me 'e didn't know what you were after."

"He knows," answered Miss Wicking. "But he'll keep it to 'imself. It'll cost us a bob a day, but it's worth it. 'E wants the money. 'E's saving up for a bowl of goldfish, Mrs Marshman told me. I thought that'd fetch 'im."

"What if 'e does split? Or gets caught?"

"We put it on Marshmans, see? Nothing to do with us. They give 'im the paper round. They give 'im the parcels. It's our word against theirs."

Reg Wicking nodded doubtfully. He was not altogether sure what his word was worth, not with ~~them~~, anyhow.

On thinking things over, away from the terror of the fish storehouse, Graham came to the conclusion that Miss Wicking really had no pull over him at all. If she cut his throat she cut her own at the same time, quite fatally. Besides, the Marshmans might find out, and would be sure to disapprove of their trade bicycle being used for any other purpose than delivering newspapers. Or would they? For the first time he asked himself what was so inherently wrong with the Wickings's traffic in meat? They bought it, or did they? Anyway, they sold it. It was against the law, but not against common sense, certainly not against the natural desire for food. Thinking of the money he would be able to add to his savings, he came to the easy

conclusion that what was O.K. by the Wickings' customers was O.K. by him. It wasn't only meat, after all. Derek had told him stories of fiddles over cars and car-tyres, and his father had one or two good ones of what went on in the gas industry. The only thing that mattered was not to get caught out with the stuff. He thought he could manage that one.

As if to smooth his path and ease his conscience, Mr Marshman, at the end of that week, contracted bronchitis. The attack was severe enough to send him to bed, and the doctor was called. Mrs Marshman found herself not only with the business on her hands but as an invalid who showed no kind of weakness in his incessant demands. After a miserable week-end panting to and fro between the counter and the sick-bed, she decided to engage Graham for extra work in the shop.

"How'd you like to earn a bit more for being a good boy?" she asked him.

Graham nodded his head, uncertain what this meant.

"Sweep out the shop, and serve behind the counter when I'm busy upstairs with 'is lordship. You'll have to put down what you take and I'll fix you a little box for the cash, so I can check it."

"I'd like to, Mrs Marshman."

"That's a 'good 'un. Start tomorrow."

"I could start this afternoon."

She agreed to that.

"Can I do the fish?"

"Can you do what?"

"It's their feeding day today. Can I give it them and clean them out?"

"Oh, my Gawd!" said Mrs Marshman. "I quite forgot the blessed old things. They never had anything Friday. It went clean out of my mind."

Graham's look of concern went to her heart.

"You go in right away and see to them," she said, patting his shoulder. "Not that I've noticed anything wrong," she defended herself.

Nor did Graham find any difference. The fish looked as remote and beautiful as ever, turning gracefully among the foliage of their quiet world. With enormous relief he set about the feeding and cleaning, and when he had finished went to work in the shop with a vigour that earned him genuine praise from Mrs Marshman.

"He's a real good lad," she told her husband later. "You should 'ave seen 'im turn to."

"Feathering 'is nest," said Mr Marshman sulkily. "A pretty penny it'll cost us."

"Don't be so mean. D'you expect me to be run off my legs day in day out till the doctor lets you up."

"If you take that tone with me, my girl, I'll get up in the morning, doctor or no perishing doctor."

"I've a very good mind to let you."

They glared at one another, all the resentments of all the years standing between them. But Mrs Marshman knew her Ben. As he continued to stare up at her from his pillow she gave a short laugh.

"Ought to be ashamed of yourself, at your age, acting so silly. I'll get you something to drink. Which is it to be this time, tea or cocoa?"

As he refused to answer her, she said, "Tea then. I could do with a cup myself."

"Cocoa," he demanded before she reached the door.

"All right. Cocoa. It's all up to me."

He was left with a feeling of defeat.

After that, Graham stayed each morning for two hours after he had finished the paper round, and went back for two hours in the afternoon before closing time.

The Wickings soon got to know of his extended job, and it was not long before Miss Wicking gave another turn to the screw.

"Now you're down again in the afternoon you might as well take the parcels then."

"I can't. I dursn't leave the counter."

"You won't 'ave to. Me or Reg always drops in for the

paper, don't we? Well, I'll bring a bag with me. The old woman isn't in the shop same time as you, is she?"

"No, but . . ."

"That'll do, son. I see you take the cash. What's to prevent me slipping a word to 'er you give me the wrong change?"

"You couldn't! I never!"

"What's to prevent me, I said? It's your word against mine."

That afternoon Miss Wickin' chose a moment when the shop was empty to deliver a neat bundle of parcels done up in brown paper. Graham hid them in a corner of the shop where he knew Mrs Marshman would not be likely to notice them.

Miss Wickin' went home very satisfied with her progress. For the next few days there would be no need to have Graham in her yard in the morning. It would break the routine, which would be a good thing. Reg was getting jumpy again, imagining things. The man on the other side of the road yesterday and this morning, for instance. He swore it was the same face. Was the blighter one of them? They'd see in the morning, when Graham brought her paper to the shop door for a change, as she'd told him to. Anyway, if the balloon went up they'd be in the clear. The last remains of the week's supply were now at Marshmans', waiting to go out with the lad in the morning.

XV

THREE weeks went by. Mr Marshman recovered from his bronchitis; Graham went back to school at the end of the holidays. Soon after this, Mrs Marshman consulted Dr Forrest on her own account, because she was feeling run down after nursing her husband, and depressed about Graham. Until the boy went back to school she did not understand how much she had come to rely upon having him near her, and though she now made a point of being the one to give him the newspapers for his round every morning, this short encounter was not enough to satisfy her growing affection.

Dr Forrest was a sympathetic and kindly man; he still found time for the old patients he understood, having treated them on and off for more than twenty years. He told Mrs Marshman that she ought to adopt the boy. He knew the Howards as well as he knew the Marshmans; they were also on his list. He saw nothing but gain for Graham if Mrs Marshman took his advice.

"Ben wouldn't never stand for it," said Mrs Marshman sadly. "Never wanted children, not even when we was first married."

"Give him a bit longer then. Perhaps he'll come round to it in time."

"If 'e did," said Mrs Marshman, "there'd be Alf Howard to get round, and that'd be worse than Ben. Proper stubborn, that man is. Look at the way 'e stood for Maud all those years. Sheer will-power, if you ask me."

"Well, he changed his mind in the end," said the doctor. "So perhaps he would over Graham. There, you take this prescription to the chemist, and go to work on Marshman. Gradually, you know. Don't rush it."

Later that day Dr Forrest found himself wishing his patients were all as simple as the Marshmans, with their obvious needs and tough constitutions. He stopped his car in Farrer Street and knocked at the door of number nineteen, with a shrinking distaste for his next piece of work.

Mrs Williams opened the ~~door~~ ^{door} to him.

"Oh, it's ~~you~~ ^{your doctor}. I did hope you'd be calling today. They've sent Syd home, but I'm sure he's not fit to leave the hospital yet. I can't think why they let him out."

"I had a report about him. Is he in bed?"

"Yes, doctor. He's too weak to set a foot to the ground."

"I know. He's had a very bad time, hasn't he?"

Jean Williams's eyes filled with tears.

"They never should have sent him home in this state."

"I thought he wanted to come home."

"Yes, he did. You know Syd. Never likes to give trouble. But they shouldn't have let him come."

"Can I go up?"

"Yes, doctor, I'll get you some hot water. You know your way, don't you? I'll bring it up in a minute."

Dr Forrest climbed the steep flight of stairs to the bedroom. He knew what he would find, but even so, even after all his years of experience, he felt the same shock of awe, of helplessness, of grief, that he had always felt when he saw the approach of death in a patient's face.

Syd was lying on his side, facing the door. He was waiting to see how the doctor would look when he came round it. He was perfectly aware of the unspoken verdict at the hospital; he refused it, and would continue to refuse, and to fight. But he wanted to see at once whether his own doctor was an ally or a deserter.

He found he was neither; he was simply a friend. Dr Forrest put his bag unopened on the table beside the bed. He sat down on the edge of the bed itself, his hand stretching out automatically for the sick man's pulse. But before his fingers closed on the wrist they rested briefly on the whole hand, with a gentle warmth that brought Syd's other hand to cover them. So for a few seconds the two men, looking into one another's eyes, shared the knowledge that lay deep in both their minds and hearts, and in doing so a small but not insubstantial part of Syd's burden passed from him to the other.

Neither spoke for a time, then Dr Forrest said, "I heard from the hospital."

Syd answered, "I'm not dead, for yet, by a long chalk."

"Of course not. They told you, after we had opened you up, that it was a chronic inflammation of the pancreas—that's what the butchers call the sweetbread?"

"That's right. Knocked it out, so I can't digest the fats and have a kind of diabetes as well."

"I suppose they fixed you up with everything you need at home? Pills and insulin and all?"

"Yes."

"You'll have to take it easy. You've had an operation, and you are keeping an important part of your digestion going artificially. The body is amazingly adaptable, but you've got to give it all the help you can."

"I appreciate that."

He added, as Dr Forrest turned down the bedclothes to examine him, "What's left, that is. Belsen isn't in it, eh, doctor?"

There was, indeed, very little left of the former well-proportioned body; fat and muscle had alike gone to feed the starving organism.

"You are a bit thin, certain'y," said the doctor, keeping up the fiction they had now established. "No pains or aches anywhere?"

"No."

The voice and eye were ~~been~~ steady.

"Good. Carry on then. I'll drop in again before the end of the week."

Jean Williams came up with the hot water. Dr Forrest repeated his instructions. There was the usual heart-breaking badinage about not letting the patient get out of hand. Then the doctor went downstairs, leaving the wife to tuck in the bedclothes and beat up the pillows.

He found Mrs Hope in the living-room. She was sitting in her usual place by the fire, but as he came in she got slowly to her feet.

"You've no 'opes of 'im, 'ave you, doctor?"

He answered her gravely, "No hopes at all."

The old woman turned away to ~~lower~~ herself into her chair.

"Gawd 'elp 'er. And little ~~Marie~~. You won't tell 'er?"

"Not yet." ~~-----~~

"Does 'e know?"

"Yes, he knows. We haven't told him, but of course he knows. He'll fight."

She sighed, an old woman's sigh for the folly of it.

"'E's young, you see," she answered, as if an excuse had to be made for the mutiny. "They always takes it 'ard. My youngest went in consumption about Syd's age. What is it with 'im? Cancer?"

"No. It has a long name you wouldn't remember. It's a kind of disease of the blood vessels."

She was not listening, so he stopped his difficult explanation.

He would have to say something like it to Jean, but she would not understand any better. It was worse for him now than in the old days. Then the doctor knew comparatively little of the causes of disease, and all the inexplicable fatal conditions were the will of God, and acceptable as such. Now they had to be accounted for, and usually could be accounted for, even if nothing could be done about them. But something was expected to be done. An answer was demanded. If the machine went wrong, it must be mended. Almost mortality was denied, obliterating accidents apart. Death was becoming an abnormality.

Jean Williams came into the living-room. In the dimmer light at the back of the house her face shone whitely, with dark smudges under the eyes.

She said very quietly, "He looks terrible, doctor, doesn't he? Is there any chance for him?"

"It is a condition we know very little about," Dr Forrest answered, ignoring the direct question. "It is called endarteritis obliterans. That means a blocking up of the blood vessels. In his case it has knocked out a very important organ. We have to try to supply what he lacks by giving him various extracts of the similar glands in animals. It is so rare a condition in this form that we have not much experience in treating it."

He hoped she had not heard of the early experiments leading to the discovery of insulin. How, if a dog's pancreas was removed, entire, it soon died. Since functionalism had fixed upon science for a constant supply of material, you never knew how much people had heard on the wireless, or read in magazines.

"We must just go on trying," said Mrs Hope from her chair. "Trying and hoping and praying."

"We'll do all that." Jean's face brightened. "Then you don't think they could do any more in the hospital? They did right to send him home?"

"Yes, they did right. He asked to come, and would only have fretted if they'd said no. He's happier here, with you to look after him."

"I'll *make* him well," she said in a low voice. "I'll do everything you say, and more besides."

He wrote out prescriptions for fresh supplies of the things Syd would need, and certificates for health insurance and for his employer.

"I'll be in again before the end of the week," he repeated mechanically as he left the house.

For the rest of his round that day he was abstracted. A good many children were successfully fighting the less deadly kinds of bacteria; a good many elderly people were improving, under his guidance, various means to lessen the discomforts of decline. None of these people needed him very much, some of them not at all. He thought with bitterness how few interesting cases, under the new routines, were left in his care. The hospitals got them all, investigated, cured them, or else sent them back, like Syd, failures to be eased out of the world. Just a sorting machine, that was all he was, but supposed to know everything in every branch of medicine all the same. Excluded from the hospitals, where the research was done, but expected to keep up to date, and to be keen and interested. He thought with regret of the days when he had treated his substantial number of private patients entirely himself; put them in nursing-homes, called in technicians or specialists, as he needed them. He had been a happier man in those days, though he had felt his responsibilities more keenly. Perhaps because he had ~~had~~ felt them so.

By the time ~~the~~ evening surgery came round Dr Forrest had decided, not for the first time, that the game was no longer worth the candle, and emigration about the most hopeful solution. But the patients, each intent on his personal ills, found their doctor no less sympathetic than usual, only rushed for time, of course, as he always was.

Mrs Howard was late at 'The Bear and Pole' that evening. She had gone home late after the morning opening, because the little nips she had taken then had slowed down her work clearing away after closing time. Then again, as a result of the little nips, she had overslept in the afternoon, and no one

had come up to call her, as they sometimes did. She took longer to dress than usual, because she was still drowsy, and longer still to get away from Vincent Street, because she had to search round her rooms for quite a long time trying to find a bottle of gin she believed she had put by in some safe place or other. She had to set off without it, which meant that she took two wrong turnings while her thoughts were still on the mystery of its disappearance. She reached 'The Bear and Pole' at seven o'clock.

"This won't do, Maudie," said Mr Biggs tolerantly, but there was an edge to his voice that she did not like.

"Are you criticizing my behaviour?" she asked with slow dignity.

Mr Biggs looked at her thoughtfully. She was no good to him in her present state. In fact she was a liability: it would get the House a bad name.

"Take the evening off, girl," he suggested. "You need a rest. I can see you're tired out."

"No, I'm not tired. It's my nerves. Ever since they took Graham from me . . ."

Her voice broke. There were customers waiting at the bar, but Mr Biggs blocked her way to her accustomed place.

"Let me by," she said, raising her voice a little. "I'll take something to settle the nerves when I get the lot served."

"No," said Mr Biggs, still blocking the way. "I mean it. You go home; take the evening off. I'll make up your money just as usual. If your nerves are bad, go and see your doctor."

"You want to get rid of me, don't you? You think I'm canned."

"I think you're tired."

He was gently pushing her back as he spoke, until he could get the door shut behind them both, cutting off the view of the interested customers. She turned suddenly then, to walk away from him. She knew when she was beaten. You could go just so far with George Biggs, but no further.

"That's a good girl," said Mr Biggs to her retreating back.

"You go up to your doctor for a bottle. See you in the morning."

He followed her to the side door, shutting it softly and locking it in case she tried to get in again that way. Then he went back to the bar. He wondered if the time had not come at last to drop Maud Howard. She was getting worse now she was completely on her own. It was a convenience to him, her being alone, but it didn't do her any good. Would she go, though, if he did give her notice? That was another problem. She might start creating, even to Mrs Biggs; that would be awkward, after all these years. She was a problem, certainly.

Dr Forrest, at the end of a long session, was faced by Mr Biggs's problem, now lacrimose and incoherent. He was used to this sort of thing. In the early days he had tried various forms of treatment; now he knew that drunks, except in institutions, were hopeless cases. A waste of everyone's time.

"I'll give you the usual, Mrs Howard. You can get it made up in the morning. Go home and go to bed. How's Derek?"

"Norr—'eard—a worr. Never."

"All right. You go along home."

She wandered off down the hill from his house, tried to get a drink at the first public-house she came to, was refused, and wandered on again. She thought of going up to the Common to see Alf, but changed her mind when she remembered Mrs Collings. Nothing would induce her to speak to that woman. She knew the sort. Nothing would induce her to see her, far less speak to the bitch. Alf had made his bed and he must lie on it. Nothing would induce her . . .

For an hour or more she moved along pavements, scarcely knowing where she was, but avoiding other people with the skill of life-long practice. She crossed roads with the same instinctive security, safe as long as no one spoke to her. Once, when a word or two of rough advice followed her wavering steps off the pavement, she stopped in the middle of the traffic to shout her answer, while cars and buses checked violently, cursed her, and passed on at either side.

It was dark by the time she reached the house in Vincent

Street. A street lamp showed her the steps to the front door. Inside, the house was darker than the street. Thin lines of yellow light marked the bottom of the doors on the ground floor, but the floor above, and her own rooms higher still, were all a black mass stretching away above her head.

She began to mount. And now, with the effort of raising her considerable weight from step to step, she knew she was very tired. No longer drunk, but clouded with fatigue. Her head swam, she began to sweat and feel sick, but she went on climbing the stairs, pushing back the darkness as she mounted, feeling it close in softly behind her.

She knew when she had reached the end of the first flight, because as she tried to climb another stair her foot came down on the landing with a crash that jarred her knee unmercifully. That made her pause to rub the joint, half crying, half cursing. Then she moved on again.

At the top of the flight to her own rooms she took extra care. She had counted the steps, so she knew she had arrived. She lifted her foot slowly, just in case she had made a mistake, and brought it down with equal slowness, but in a firm tread, letting her weight go forward with it.

The black cat from the floor below, waiting for its family to come home and let it in, had watched Mrs Howard's careful progress, crouched ready to move. Her very dejection misled it. The descending foot in the end came down quickly, before it had time to spring sideways out of reach. A dreadful squawk came on the instant Mrs Howard felt the horrid yielding of flesh beneath her foot. She screamed loudly, drew back convulsively, lost her balance, and fell backwards down the stairs.

At once the house came alive. All the doors on the ground floor were flung open, and light from them filled the hall, penetrating upwards to beyond the first floor, but not quite to the angle of the second flight, where Mrs Howard lay groaning. There were cries and orders and counter-orders. But almost at once torches were found and a troop of excited people went up to her aid.

"As I've always said, what with no proper light on the stairs, there's bound to be accidents."

"The landlord'll 'ave to take notice now. We'll 'ave the law on 'im."

"Who is it?"

"Who d'you think? Why she 'asn't gone down before passes be 'ief."

"Stand back. Give 'er a chance. Where's it hurt, dear?"

"Oh, I do feel bad. I can't stand the sight of a accident."

"Why do you stop, then?"

All this time Mrs Howard lay in an untidy heap against the wall of the landing, not moving, except to open her mouth now and then to let out a groan. But presently she tried to pull herself into a sitting position, and finding this sent unbearable stabs of pain through her right thigh, she gave a short yelp and sank back.

"It's 'er leg," concluded the onlookers.

"Better send for the doctor. Who does she go to? Forrest?"

"That's right."

So Dr Forrest, relaxing with the newspaper after his supper, found himself faced with Mrs Howard for the second time that evening. The message was confused, it might be a sprain and it might be something more serious. He would have to find out.

But when he arrived in Vincent Street he found that the neighbours had had second thoughts, on the whole quite sensible ones. They had brought in a policeman, who had ordered an ambulance. The St John's men had fixed Mrs Howard's leg in a splint and were just loading her into the ambulance as he got out of his car. He stepped up into it to speak to her.

"They didn't ought to 'ave called you," she said. She was quite sober now, in pain, weak from shock, but by no means beaten. "I'm ever so sorry you've been troubled, doctor."

"Never mind that." He felt guilty for the summary way he had dismissed her earlier.

"Would you get 'old of Derek," she said. "I don't want Alf. I want Derek."

He promised to do what he could, and the ambulance drove off with her. He explained matters to the constable.

"Perhaps you'd care to tell them the particulars at the Station, sir," the latter suggested.

"Yes, they'll get through to his unit for me, won't they?"

He rang up the Police Station as soon as he was home again. He felt it was the least he could do.

COMPASSIONATE LEAVE

XVI

DEREK reached the hospital late in the afternoon of the next day, which was a Friday. He had been given twenty-four hours' leave.

He found his mother at the end of a long ward in which almost every bed was decorated with a complicated system of frames, pulleys, and strings. Hers was no exception; her injured limb, in thick white plaster, stuck up in the air, suspended in flannel bands, with a weight attached to her ankle dangling from the end of the frame. The leg seemed to have no connection with the rest of her body until she saw him, tried to sit up, twitched her protruding toes in painful effort, and sank back groaning.

"A nice thing!" she complained, her eyes filling with tears. "At my age!"

"You don't look too bad," said Derek in a low voice. "Better'n I thought you might."

He sat down on a small chair near the locker at the head of the bed. He was relieved to find her so apparently well.

"Then you don't know much," said Mrs Howard. "I'd like to see you lying 'elpless, with your back on fire and your leg in agony and the nurses running up and down saying, 'Yes, Mrs Howard,' 'In a minute, Mrs Howard,' 'You can bloody well wait, Mrs Howard.'"

"They never!"

"That's wot they think."

She licked her lips, looking round carefully to see if anyone was watching them. Then she reached out to lay her hand over Derek's.

"Did you bring me anything, dear? Any little extras? I'm allowed a stimulant now and then, the doctor said. Such a nice young fellow. Put me out of my misery last night with a

injection and I didn't come to till the morning. Did you remember, dear?"

"I've only just come up," Derek answered truthfully.

He knew what she meant. To take her mind off the subject, he asked her for a full account of the accident. Mrs Howard was quite willing to oblige. The trouble was it was not very clear in her own mind. It was all the fault of the cat, she explained, but the landlord was in the wrong too for not putting bulbs in the landing and hall lights, nor the right kind of switch to turn them on and off from each landing. If there had been lights she would have seen the cat.

Derek, who knew the stairs of his home at night, agreed with her. It might be a case for damages. He found his mother echoing his thoughts.

"I ought to take an action," she said.

"You might. Better talk to the doctors."

"They don't know."

"Dr Forrest, then. He was called, wasn't he? It was him got me my leave."

She lay looking up at her son. It was no good seeing old Forrest, she thought. He'd be sure to spill the beans.

The wireless in the ward gave out the pips for six o'clock. Mrs Howard sighed.

"I don't know how they'll manage without me," she said. Derek knew she was thinking of 'The Bear and Pule.' When he remembered George Biggs's fat neck he glowed inwardly with rage. His mother saw his eyes darken. She knew it was a mistake to speak of it, but she could not stop herself.

"If you go up there, you might tell them I'm ever so sorry to be laid up. It'll be a long job, you'd better say. Three months in plaster, they said this morning, and then some. Tell them I couldn't 'elp it." And again she laid a warm hand over his. "Fetch me back a little of something to pick me up, there's a dear."

"I'll have to ask Sister," Derek answered.

She gave a despairing shake of the head.

"Don't you dare! The old cat! D'you know what she 'ad

the effrontery to say to me today? 'A little discipline, Mrs Howard,' she said, with her spiteful smile, 'is good for the soul.' With a meaning look too, as much as to say she knew very well what she was talking about. I ask you? Discipline! And me lying in agony."

"I dursn't bring anything of that sort in without permission," said Derek virtuously.

She smacked his hand at that, and shut her eyes, letting the tears squeeze their way out past her closed lids.

"You're every bit as bad as they are! Taking it out of your old mother, now she's a 'elpless cripple."

"Don't you worry," said Derek, rising. He had had as much as he could stand. He stooped over her to kiss her cheek. Poor old girl, it must have hurt at the start, though she looked pretty good now.

"Be seeing you," he murmured.

But she would not answer him, only lay with closed eyes, forcing the tears out over her cheeks.

Before he left the hospital Derek had a talk with the Sister of the ward. He learned that though his father had been told, through the police, of Mrs Howard's accident, he had not yet visited his wife, nor communicated in any way with the hospital. Sister was relieved to find the injured woman had at least one interested member of her family, but she had seen enough already of the patient to understand the main cause of dissension.

Derek went at once to the Common. Mrs Collings opened the door to him, and when she saw who it was outside, made as if to shut it again in his face. But she changed her mind, merely closing the door to a narrow strip through which she announced unamiably, "'E's not 'ome."

"I come to see Dad," said Derek slowly.

"I tell you 'e's not 'ome."

"It's about Mum. I just come from the hospital. He's been told of it, but he hasn't been down there, et to inquire."

"It's not my business," said Mrs Collings emphatically.

"I never said it was. It's up to Dad, though. I've spoken to Sister in the ward. It looks bad, him not going up."

"'E might be on 'is way now. I really couldn't say. 'E doesn't tell me much."

"You heard about the accident, though."

I couldn't 'elp but hear, what with the police knocking us up in the small hours. That's the second time that woman's caused a disturbance in my house. First young Graham, through her neglect. And now 'erself, through no fault but 'er own."

Derek felt his face burn at her insolent tone. But he had sufficient self-restraint not to start a slanging match with her. It could do no possible good to anyone. Instead, he changed the subject by asking for Graham.

"Out too."

"At this time?"

"'E's gone to play cricket, 'e said, over to the playing fields. I wouldn't know. 'E's not been gone an hour."

"When will he be back?"

"Bedtime at nine, or no cocoa. That keeps 'im punctual, sec."

Though he believed in discipline for the young, her tone infuriated Derek. But he was helpless. It would be no good hanging about here for Graham, much less for his father. He gave up the unequal struggle.

"You might tell Dad they expect him at the hospital," he said, in his young solemn voice. "And tell Graham I'll be at our place in the morning, but I've got to report back to my unit in the afternoon, unless Mum's took a turn for the worse."

"I'll tell your father," Mrs Collings said grudgingly.

"And Graham?"

She shut the door in his face without answering.

Feeling disinclined to go back to Vincent Street so early, since he knew what a state of squalor he would find in the rooms there, he walked back to the Wandsworth High Street, and found a café where he had a generous helping of sausages and chips, washed down with strong tea.

After that he felt more sure of himself. He remembered that his mother had asked him to deliver a message at "The Bear

and Pole.' Certainly they were entitled to know of her present plight, and though he was most unwilling to encounter Mr Biggs in any capacity, he did feel that in her interest, if for no other reason, her employer should be told as soon as possible.

The public bar when he entered it was full of people. Mr Biggs and Peggy, the young barmaid, were working at top speed to supply their customers. Squeezing his way slowly along the outer edge of the circle round the bar, Derek decided that he could not possibly speak of his mother in so public a place, nor would it be possible for a long time ahead, to engage Mr Biggs in private conversation. He moved on, finding a clearer space near the wall of the room.

But here he found himself not far from the connecting door leading to the saloon bar. There was a good chance of it being quieter there. He opened the door and went in.

It was, in fact, much quieter, almost embarrassingly so, he found, as he shut the door behind him. A grey-haired woman with a pale, lined face sat on a high stool behind the bar, resting gnarled hands upon it, while at some distance from her two groups of people sat round tables, three men with their backs to the room, under the window, and a middle-aged couple side by side on a leather-covered wall seat opposite.

As he hesitated in the doorway, Mrs Biggs beckoned him closer. He went forward, searching for the right phrase in which to deliver his news. But before he had time to do this, one of the men round the table rose to carry three glasses to the bar. Derek saw that it was Netta's father, Mr Smith.

The latter was by no means pleased to see his daughter's discarded boy-friend. He was too conscious of that other young man who had recently been visiting the house, a type he did not care for in the least, but who had earned the easy admiration of Mrs Smith, always ready to fall for a fluent tongue or a slick appearance. In the second place, he was at 'The Bear and Pole' on business, the sort of business he liked to conduct as far from his normal associates as possible. So he greeted Derek very briefly, while he waited for the glasses to be filled up again.

"Are you two acquainted?" asked Mrs Biggs, hoping to keep them both chatting at the bar.

"He's a friend of my girl's," said Mr Smith shortly.

"Won't you introduce me?" said Mrs Biggs, and, turning to Derek, added, "Any friend of Netta's is welcome. Sweetly pretty, she is. I only wish I'd ever had a daughter like her."

"Derek Howard," said Mr Smith. "I thought you'd 'ave known 'im already, seeing his mother works here."

Derek thought it was time to say something. The way the two old sparrows were chirping over him made him feel hot all down his spine.

"Mum's had an accident, Mrs Biggs," he blurted out, glad to get it over. "Last night, late. Broke her leg. She's at St Agnes's Hospital—on a frame," he added, to give the accident its due importance.

Mrs Biggs concealed her secret joy at the news. After all, it wasn't the poor lad's fault his mother was what she was. Looked a nice young fellow. A friend of the Smiths, too.

"I wanted to tell Mr Biggs," went on Derek, wondering why she seemed to take the news so much as a matter of course. "But the bar was full."

"I'll tell him." Mrs Biggs found her tongue again. She said, as she reached for a glass, "What can I get for you?"

"Burton, please," Derek answered.

Mr Smith, who was trying to gather three full glasses into his hands without spilling their contents, put them down again to pull some coins from his pocket.

"This one's on me," he said.

When he had thanked him, Derek took up one of the three glasses in one hand and his own in the other.

"I'll take this over for you," he offered.

Mr Smith could only accept. Arrived at the table, he waved a hand towards his other companions.

"Mr Bentham," he said.

"Charlie," that individual protested.

"And Harry."

"Biggs," added the son of the House.

"Sit down, Derek, sit down."

Charlie Bentham and Harry Biggs leaned back in their chairs, exchanging signals over the bent heads of the other two. Possibly Smith was bringing in another customer, or even a recruit, but more likely not. Probably just a friend, in which case the next hour or so would be wasted. They warned one another to play a waiting game, but Mr Smith took the decision out of their hands.

"Young Derek is a friend of my girl's," he said. "He knows my views on present times. Don't you, Derek?"

"That's right," the young man answered.

"Charlie was the one to put me in the way of building up my little business," Mr Smith went on expansively. "Jobs in my own time of an evening. Good jobs, some of them, eh, Charlie?"

"In your own line of business, I take it?" Derek said politely.

"That's right. Upholstery. Folk that can't afford the big prices for repairs and new covers. They don't only pay for the work, see, it's the materials, with purchase tax, that come so expensive. Purchase tax, eh, Charlie?"

The others both laughed, though Derek could not see a joke anywhere. Mr Smith tapped him on the forearm.

"Charlie-boy doesn't have to pay tax on the materials. Special privilege."

"Why?" asked Derek. He thought all three men had been drinking too much; there seemed to be little sense in Mr Smith's remarks.

"That's asking," said Charlie Bentham, following this with a wink and a loud laugh.

But Harry Biggs, who had drunk more than the others, and could carry less, was inclined to be confidential. Charlie, with his laugh and his wink, had given him the all-clear.

"If you know where to lay your hands on a commodity, sort of by-pass the regulations, it's just too darned easy," he offered. "You ought to know. You're in the Army."

Derek grinned. Sure, he was in the Army.

Seeing that Mr Smith was now talking confidentially to Charlie Bentham, Harry leaned forward.

"Did he say the name was Howard?" he asked.

"That's right."

"Any relation of our Maudie?"

"Yes. She's my mother. That's why I come. To explain to Mr Biggs about her accident. I just come on from the hospital."

Harry nodded.

"We heard. Out for a couple of months, isn't it?"

"It'll be more than that. The Sister said . . ."

But Harry Biggs was not interested in medical assessments. He went on, "Got a kid brother, haven't you? Name of Graham?"

"That's right."

"Nice lad, that. Intelligent."

Any praise of Graham warmed Derek's heart. He smiled at Harry, willing to start a catalogue of the boy's achievements. But Harry did not seem to be able to stick to one subject. Again he was off at a tangent.

"Charlie's the living wonder," he said, still in his rapid, confidential voice. "Talk about irons in the fire; he's a whole blooming blacksmith's shop!"

"How d'you mean?"

"You heard him on about the upholstery? Well, that's nothing to his other interests." He lowered his voice still further. "I can talk to you, as you're in the family, so to speak. The meat business is the side that interests us here, naturally. Charlie's depot again. Or did you know that?"

"No, I didn't," said Derek.

He was sure now that Harry Biggs was drunk, letting out things he had no business to let out. Charlie Bentham must be a doubtful character if ever there was one, and Harry the smooth type he suggested in his clothes and hair-cut and refined way of speaking. In the family, indeed! His mother again, he supposed.

Harry Biggs took up his glass and went over to the bar. Derek followed him. Mrs Biggs filled up both glasses, "on the House," and they stayed talking to her for a few minutes. Derek saw how her uncritical eyes rested on her son's face with loving admiration, and he felt sorry for her.

"Must go back to the old boys over there," said Harry when his glass was again empty.

"Have another on me," Derek suggested.

"Thanks. I don't mind if I do."

Derek paid for the drink, then followed Harry back. He was worried about the reference to his family. He was ready to believe his mother involved in almost any kind of shameful enterprise. But though Harry went on describing his own exploits in the meat trade, he mentioned no more names. Neither the Wickings and their van nor Graham and the newspapers were mentioned. Derek, listening, could make nothing of it all. He's just drunk, he decided, and doesn't know what he's talking about.

Their conversation came to a slow stop, and for a time they sat there, listening to the indistinct muttering of Charlie Bentham and Mr Smith. Finally the latter looked up.

"I must be getting back now," he said, rising as he spoke. "Coming my way, Derek?"

It was as good a means as any of leaving 'The Bear and Pole.' But before he left, Derek went back to the counter again.

"You won't forget to tell Mr Biggs about my mother's accident, will you, Mrs Biggs?" he reminded the landlord's wife.

"I won't forget," she answered, smiling.

He was a taking young chap she thought. He'd be a nice friend for Harry. None of his mother's looseness about him, to judge from his appearance. Most of Harry's friends weren't a patch on him. Before he went out again with Charlie Bentham, she said as much to Harry, at which he roared with laughter, and told her another crack like that would be the death of him.

Derek walked part of the way to Wimbledon with Mr Smith. At first they talked about the weather, then of Derek's work in the Army and the intricacies of obtaining compassionate leave. By slow and devious paths Mr Smith brought the conversation round to Mrs Howard's position at 'The Bear and Pole.' Her accident he ignored.

"Bin working there some time, I understand?" he asked.

"Best part of fifteen years. Stuck it all through the bombing. That was why we were evacuated on our own, Graham and me."

"They must think a lot of her there."

"Seems so. Young Harry was saying only tonight she was in on this business they run with Mr Bentham."

"Business *they* run? Who's *they*?"

"He and his father, I suppose. I don't know."

"What business?"

"Something the same as yours." Then, seeing Mr Smith's blank amazement, he added, "Not ~~the~~ poultry, I don't mean. But they do it on the Q.T. Meat, he said."

"Harry said that? Black-market meat?"

"So he gave me to understand. He'd been having a good few, of course."

Mr Smith looked shocked, which Derek thought very unreasonable, since his upholstery quite clearly came into the same class of business.

"Charlie Bentham supplies them?"

"That's what he said."

"And your ma's mixed up in it?"

"I never said that." Derek was indignant.

"You implied it."

Mr Smith's face had gone rather white; he stood still at the next corner and held out a prim hand to his young friend.

"You'll be wanting to get back to the hospital, I expect," he said. "I hope there are no complications, for your sake, at any rate." He paused, then added, looking away into the distance. "I don't know if Netta wrote you she's been out a good deal lately with a young fellow, works at the Polytechnic. Studying commercial art. Advertising, I take it." |

Derek remembered the skinny arms and the bright shirt. He said nothing.

"Well, good luck to you," said Mr Smith.

He stepped off the pavement, crossed the road, and walked on in the direction of his home. Derek went back to Vincent Street. They had told him at the hospital not to visit his

mother again until the morning. He had to be back in Aldershot by the evening of the next day. That would make his twenty-four hours.

Mr Smith walked about the streets for over an hour. Somehow it had never occurred to him that Charlie Bentham's furniture depot was merely a blind for other and various activities. He had thought of Charlie hitherto as a furniture man frustrated like himself, doing business as it came his way. But Derek, through the indiscretion of Harry Biggs, had altered all that.

Before he let himself into his own house Mr Smith decided that he had already built up a sufficient connection: he could now dispense with Charlie's help. A few more jobs on his own, a little further swelling of the nest egg, and he would take the plunge. It had only needed this to make up his mind for him. Tomorrow morning he would answer that likely-looking advert he had carried about in his breast pocket for over a fortnight.

XVII

MUCH to his annoyance, Derek overslept the next morning. He had planned to be up very early, to go along the street to the Marshmans' shop, and there to wait for Graham. The boy, he knew, began his round soon after seven. By getting to the shop at, or just before, the hour, he thought he would be sure to meet him.

But when he roused himself, with some difficulty, from a heavy sleep, he found the time was five minutes to eight. He had therefore missed Graham at the start of his round. So there were only two courses he could follow. Either he could ask at the shop where the boy was likely to be, and go after him in the rather doubtful hope of catching him up, or he could go to the shop at half-past eight to waylay him on his return. His impatience with himself recommended the

former course, in which Mrs Marshman proved to be sympathetic and helpful. In a very short time he had set off in pursuit of his brother. He soon reached the bottom of West Hill and began to walk up it, looking for the turning which led to Dr Forrest's house. Presently he found this turning and left West Hill behind him.

There were very few people about. The milk carts of days gone by no longer were obliged by competition to deliver early in the morning. The electric or motor vans set off later to make their leisurely round. There were no maids to watch for them, sweeping front steps or shaking out doormats. Most of the front steps were dirty, and many of the windows.

A second turn brought Derek into the road he was looking for. It was deserted like the others, but about halfway down it he saw a newspaper bicycle propped up against the curb. He quickened his pace.

But before he reached it, and before anyone came from any of the houses to claim it, a large golden setter bounded from one of the gates, and after sniffing at the dependent bag that hung from the bicycle bar, leaped up against the machine several times, until he brought it crashing to the ground. He then thrust his muzzle into the bag, dragged out what looked like a roll of newspapers, and disappeared with it the way he had come. While Derek stared in astonishment, quickening his pace still more, he saw Graham come flying from another gate to fling himself on the fallen machine. His loud shout of recognition and welcome stopped the younger boy, who stood waiting for him, leaning on the bicycle with a very strange look on his face.

"I come up to the Common last night," Derek said. "But you were out. So was Dad. You've heard about Mum, I suppose?"

"Yeah. The cops come up and told Dad."

"Why wasn't he at the hospital?"

Graham looked away.

"I dunno. Auntie said he ought to go."

"Auntie?"

"Mrs Collings."

"I thought I told you not to call that woman Auntie?"

"She says I got to. I have to call 'er something, don't I?"

"Don't be cheeky. What was that dog doing knocking down your bike?"

"It's Dr Forrest's dog. It hears me put the paper in the box."

"It went off with some of your papers. You'd better go after it."

Graham shrugged carelessly.

"They was only ones."

Derek did not know what to make of this, but was ready to accept it, for the newspaper bundle the dog had pulled out did not, even at a distance, look either fresh or clean. He turned, waiting for Graham to wheel the bicycle forward.

But at that moment a familiar figure appeared at the gate of the short drive into which the setter had run off. It was Dr Forrest. Derek realized he should have expected this, because the doctor's plate, giving his name and the hours of the surgery, was fastened to the gate-post where he stood.

"Boy!" he said sternly, and as Graham turned, "Why, it's one of the Howards, isn't it?"

"Graham, sir," said Graham, breathlessly.

"Did either of you see my dog coming in through this gate with something in his mouth?"

Graham shrank back without answering, but Derek said at once, "I did. You may not recognize the uniform, sir, but I'm Derek—Derek Howard."

"So you are! Stupid of me. Up to see your mother, I expect? I'd like a word with you about that some time."

"So would I, sir. Graham, stay where you are!"

He reached out a hand to grab the back of the bicycle just as Graham was beginning to wheel it away.

"I saw the dog. With a parcel of newspapers, it looked like."

"This was it," said the doctor. He brought his hand from behind his back, to display a torn piece of paper in which lay the mangled remains of a piece of silverside of beef.

"I thought I might find a butcher's van in the road," Dr Forrest went on.

The other two shook their heads.

"No, sir," said Derek. "The dog had it in his mouth. Turned into the drive with it."

"It's not the first time," said Dr Forrest. "Must be raiding a shop somewhere. It won't do. We can't lose meat rations to that chap. He gets plenty of horse for his dinner. But I can't understand any shop letting him get away with it. Besides, they don't open till nine. It's a mystery."

The brothers nodded this time.

"Come back in surgery hours, Derek," Dr Forrest said as he turned away.

"I'd like to, sir," Derek answered.

While Graham delivered a few more newspapers in the same road, Derek held the bicycle, wheeling it slowly on while his young brother ran in and out of gates and up and down front steps. When at last they turned a corner Derek stopped.

"I saw where that meat come from," he said. "And there's a good few more parcels in the bag. Well, what's the great idea?"

Graham tried to invent a plausible story, but the situation was too difficult. In the end he broke down and needed no further prompting while he described through his tears the terrors, threats and labours to which the Wicking pair had subjected him.

"Your own fault for going over their wall at the start," said Derek unsympathetically. He chose a moment when the road was empty, and a place where thick bushes at the entrance to a drive concealed them from all prying eyes. Here he took all the remaining parcels and thrust them out of sight, covering them quickly with earth and stones.

"That's the last of that lot," he said, as he and Graham went back into the road. "Now scam. You'll be late for school else."

"What am I to do?" The boy's tears flowed afresh. "Miss Wicking won't half create. She'll put the cops on to me. She'll . . ."

"Oh, no, she won't. Because I'm going to have a word with her, see?"

"Oh!" Graham's eyes shone: Derek, the hero, was flashing

his golden sword in the sun. A lightness he had not known for weeks lifted his heart.

"All right. Don't stand there gawping. Get on back. You'll be just in time if you hurry."

"Will you be home tonight? In Vincent Street, I mean?"

"No. But I'll be back before long."

"Honest?"

Derek nodded, smiling at the child's eagerness.

"And stick to the papers. You won't see any Wickings no more. But you stick to the papers. You might not be so lucky another time."

The boy jumped on his bicycle, and sped away. Derek went on down the hill alone.

The whole dirty business was now clear to him, and because Graham was involved in it his moral indignation burned with a far brighter flame than when he had suspected only his mother and her associates at 'The Bear and Pole.' He understood at last the connection between the Wickings and Harry Biggs; it was easy to see that the fish-friers ran this sideline under cover of their own business, and that Graham had been pressed into the distributive side against his will. It was this, added to the boy's foolhardy acceptance, that made his slow anger mount. Taking advantage of a mere kid. They'd pay for that. Behind it all stood the thick-set, good-natured Charlie Bentham, with his drooping moustache and his bogus furniture depot and second-hand mart. That ultimate villain of the piece was beyond his reach, but the Wickings were vulnerable. He felt a certain elation at the thought of what he had in store for them.

Laying his plans with care as he went down Wandsworth High Street, he passed a Police Station, but it did not occur to him for a moment to give any information there. If anyone had suggested to him such a betrayal of his own kind he would have knocked him down. The quarrel lay between him and the Wickings, and on Graham's account, no other.

He found the yard gate open, and Reg hosing down the outside of the van. From the half-open door of the storehouse

the shrill voice of Miss Wicking was raised in popular song. She believed in music while you work. As she sliced and cut and washed the fish, her incessant tunes filled the yard with piercing noise.

Derek walked straight in. Reg saw him as he moved round the van, and noting the light in his blue eyes, arranged to have the hose between himself and the visitor. He had always been unsure of the wisdom of employing Graham Howard to deliver parcels. This doubt and his deeper wariness gave him an immediate knowledge of Derek's errand.

"I want a word with you," the latter said, as soon as he was within hearing.

"Morning, Derek," said Mr Wicking, raising his voice to let his sister know who was here. "You're up early. How's your ma?"

The counter-attack disconcerted Derek, as it was meant to do. Also it gave Miss Wicking time to stop her song, lay down her knife and go to the door of the storehouse, where she stood, wiping her hands on her overall.

"I've not come about her," said Derek, thrusting aside the irrelevancy. "I come about Graham."

"Oh, yeah?"

There was silence in the yard. All three drew themselves up, preparing to meet the inevitable explosion.

"I was on the paper round with Graham this morning," said Derek slowly. "It was a proper give-away."

Still the Wickings said nothing.

"Dr Forrest's dog got hold of you-know-what. The doctor got hold of it from the dog. I was there."

"I don't know what you mean," said Miss Wicking in a very refined voice.

"Quiet, you," her brother rounded on her.

"Oh yes, you do," went on Derek. "Oh yes, you bloody well do, the sneaking pair of you! You think you got a hold on young Graham because of what happened that night there was a storm. But you're mistaken. I'd have you to remember they took the kid to the Police Station before they took him up to Dad's place."

"He wouldn't say anything there. Too scared," said Mr Wicking through trembling lips.

"I shouldn't be too sure, if I was you."

"Why, that was weeks ago," added Miss Wicking. "We'd 'ave 'eard something the day after, when they was round at Marshmans."

"Did they come here?"

"No. Of course not. No call to."

"There you are," said Derek, with meaning.

This so exactly voiced Reg Wicking's perpetual fear that he lost his temper.

"You get out of 'ere!" he cried. "Coming threatening us. We done nothing, see. Go on out!"

"You know what you done," insisted Derek. "I'm not warning you for your own good. It's Graham I'm thinking of. You leave the kid alone, see? I told 'im he's not to pay no attention to you one way or another. And he's to tell me if he has any more trouble from either of you. Do your own dirty work, and leave our Graham out of it. . . . Or else."

"Or else, wot?"

It was a strong card. Both sides knew that Derek would never fulfill the direct threat. He was in earnest, though, and the Wickings were aware of it. There were other ways of throwing a spanner in the works than by going to the police. There was Dr Forrest, too. How much did he suspect, and what action would he take? Sure to be on the side of the authorities in a crisis. Wasn't he Police Doctor for the district?

Derek had no answer to the Wickings' outward defiance. He decided he had done all he came to do and it was time to retreat. Moving slowly backwards to the gate of the yard, he repeated his threats and warnings at intervals, each time calling forth ever more furious denials and counter-threats from the pair. When he was out in the street he turned abruptly on his heel and strode away.

Immediately the Wickings rushed to the yard gate to close and bar it. This done they fell upon one another, unloading all their pent-up emotion in futile rage. Miss Wicking wept, and Mr Wicking said as the scheme had been hers it was all

her fault. He called her names, and even slapped her face; at which she stopped crying to tear his hair and kick his shins. It was not her fault, she insisted. Who had gone into the business in the first place? Who had said it was money for jam, and as safe as houses?

It was a full hour before the pair were fit to start work again, which they did fitfully for the rest of that day, with many starts and stops, and one ear for the doorbell or the telephone. At dinner they were not on speaking terms, at tea coldly polite. Miss Wicking did not recover her spirits until the next morning, her brother not until the following afternoon. Almost from force of habit, they let Harry take the van out that Sunday evening. He brought it back as usual; as usual, they stored the new supply of meat, and then, under the pressure of Derek's vague threat, made it up in parcels, very well wrapped, to be sent off by post from various distant post offices during the course of Monday morning.

In the afternoon of that day an inspector called from the Public Health Department of the local authority. He had an assistant with him, a quiet, middle-aged man, who said nothing, but took various samples, for scientific purposes, the inspector said.

"Though wot they wanted, mucking about with the inside of the van, beats me," complained Reg Wicking after they had gone.

"Did you leave those sacks there?" asked his sister.

"I mayn't be as clever as you think yourself, but I'm not as dumb as all that. I burned them this morning, with those old boxes that were beginning to stink. Bit of luck I did."

"That's all right, then."

"I don't know so much." Mr Wicking's forehead was wrinkled in an anxious frown. "D'you know what I saw when I let them out the shop door?"

"No. What?"

"I looked out the window of the shop, see? There was two coppers in the road. One just near the gate and one further on, up by Marshmans. When these two chaps from the Public Health passed them, I could swear they saluted."

"Never!"

Mr Wicking nodded.

"We'd best close down for a bit. Harry ought to take the offal along to the Home as usual, but bring back the van empty. I'll go up to 'The Bear and Pole' one night and let them know."

"Don't you dare!" said Miss Wicking strenuously. "Don't you dare show your face inside that door! If there's trouble coming, we best keep right away from it, see? They've got nothing on us. Stands to reason they can't 'ave. Tell Harry when he comes next Sunday, not before. We keep right out. That's the ticket."

"I'm not so sure," replied Reg with his worried frown.

But his sister's influence was strong, and he found it easier to do nothing.

XVIII

THOUGH they thought otherwise, the time for the Wickings to escape had already gone past. In fact, they had been in the bag for some weeks. Final proofs had only been sought at their end of the business when the origin of Charlie Bentham's supplies was discovered.

The detective-inspector at the local Police Station reported to the man from Scotland Yard who was in charge of the wider issue.

"I've got the report on the blood-stains I took from the van."

"Yes?"

"There was animal blood there; not only fish. There was also some charred remains of sacks in one of the dust-bins. In one of these a piece of partly-burnt skin showed the remains of pig's bristles. There was also a fragment of bone, possibly from a sheep. Of course, that's not proof, it might have come from their own rations. But taken with the blood, it is suggestive."

"Good. They may be suspicious by now, but I want to give

them a little more rope. I plan to raid their place on Sunday night, after Biggs takes the van back there. Preferably just before he leaves again. His father often fetches him in his car; we might get both, with the stuff on them. No one else calls now; they send it out some other way; through the shop, most likely; difficult to trace. Benham will be taken care of at the same time."

"Make a clean sweep?"

"If we're lucky."

On the following Sunday evening Harry Biggs arrived in Vincent Street as usual. The weather had turned colder, and he wore a bright blue check sports coat as well as his usual old grey flannels and frayed shirt. He took off this coat when he went into the Wickings's yard. Though he did not mind wearing old clothes for any dirty job, he was very particular in his dress.

"Pop it inside the back door, dear," suggested Miss Wicking. "There's no place to lay it down out here."

Harry did so.

"Reg is out," went on Miss Wicking. "He said it was hardly worth your while taking the offal to the Home this week. We had the inspector from the Public Health in Saturday, and he didn't seem all that struck on it staying here so long. So Reg has been put to the expense of a new incinerator. They weren't 'alf nosey, those from the Public Health, I mean. Into everything. There's nothing but interference these days."

She was playing for time. She had to tell Harry they were not going to handle any more meat, and she did not know how to begin. Just like Reg, to walk out and leave her to manage the job. Then if anything went wrong, he'd blame her for it.

"D'you mean there's nothing to take up?" Harry asked, as he unfastened the doors of the van.

"One barrel. It might be worth it."

"Of course it's worth it. I must call at the Home first. I can't go direct to Charlie's. It'd look suspicious, supposing anyone had an eye on me."

Now was the time to warn him, Miss Wicking knew, and then the argument would start. Again she cursed the absent Reg for his cowardice. The more she thought of his conduct, the more she resented it. So she remained silent, in her mind paying off Reg, while Harry got the single barrel into the van, shut the doors and stepped up into the driver's seat.

"Open up, ducks," he said to Miss Wicking, leaning out.

She opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again. It wasn't quite fair to Harry, but if she told him they were not going to accept any more meat he would be furious, and Harry in a rage was something once seen, never forgotten. She had been in 'The Bear and Pole' once when Harry lost his temper with one of his own friends, after hours. He set about him with a bicycle chain, and it had taken Mr Biggs and one or two other men all their time to stop him murdering the poor chap. So she wasn't going to risk any trouble now, with Reg out of the way.

She pulled back the yard gates, and went out into the road to see if it was clear. There was hardly anyone about, and not a single copper in either direction.

As Harry backed into the road and prepared to drive off she called after him, "You've forgotten your jacket."

"I'll pick it up later," he shouted. "When I bring the van back."

"No. Wait. I'll run and get it."

She lost no time in doing so, but when she reached the street again with the coat over her arm, Harry and the van had disappeared.

"All right, young impatience," she said to herself. "That fixes it. You can whistle for your damned coat."

Going back into the house after locking the yard gates and the back door behind her, she hung the coat on a peg. Then she dressed herself again in her Sunday clothes, and ten minutes later left the shop by the side door. Reg was not in yet, and she had no intention of being there alone when Harry returned with the meat. He would soon see the place was empty, and that ought to warn him, if anything did. There was nothing to stop him taking the stuff back to Charlie.

Even if they lost the van, it wouldn't be the end of the world. Reg might have thought a bit more before he left her to hold the baby.

As she sauntered down the road she passed a man looking into the Marshmans' window. His face was familiar, but she could not place him. She had not really taken much interest at the time in the quiet, busy assistant of the Public Health official.

Harry was back with the meat in just over an hour. It surprised him to find the yard gates shut, but he drove across the pavement until the bonnet of the van nearly touched them, and then jumped down to push them open. He found they were not only closed, but locked.

Moving quickly, he went over to the side door of the shop and pressed the bell. He did not want to use the knocker because the street was so quiet; he knew a sudden noise would bring many pairs of inquisitive eyes to the neighbouring windows.

He heard the bell ring at the back of the shop, but no one answered it. It took him no time at all to realize that the Wickings had walked out on him.

In spite of his rage, a chill passed over his heart. They could have only one motive for their action: fear of exposure. Something had happened to warn them, perhaps after he had left. No, probably before, he thought, remembering Reg's unexplained absence.

Blind rage flooded him again. If only Mabel Wicking were there at that moment, he would have wrung her skinny neck with pleasure. The sight of the van astride the pavement brought him to his senses. Whatever he did later he must get rid of its contents, and that double-quick. Back to Charlie's, then.

He drove off into the road, but as he did so, he saw, turning the far corner of Vincent Street in the direction from which he had come, the black shining body and uniformed driver of a police car. He whipped the van round and made off.

At first his only thought was to put distance between himself

and the car behind. He was not sure it was after him, but if so then he had been followed, and Charlie's was out.

He drove into the main road, turned off down the first side-street, and so by frequent turns and short bursts of speed, and by avoiding the main roads, threw off his pursuers. In the course of these manoeuvres he found himself approaching Putney High Street. He judged that he had, by now, evaded pursuit, at least for the time being, so he made for Putney Hill, and from there along the Portsmouth Road to Kingston, across the river to Hampton Court, and on in the direction of Shepperton. He took a route he had often followed when his mother was out driving with him, down twisting country lanes, with the river never very far away. As he drove he worked out what he would do.

There was a spot between Shepperton and Staines where a narrow lane ran down from the road to the river bank. He had first explored this lane to save Mrs Biggs walking to see the water. Probably at some distant time there had been a ferry across the river at this point, for the lane widened as it reached the stream, and there was a suggestion of an old landing stage in some rotten timbers stuck into the bank there, close together. At either side the tow-path continued, narrowing gradually to the normal width.

Harry reached this spot just after dusk. There had been no cars on the road when he left it, and he stopped the van at the end of the lane to look up and down the river. The banks seemed to be deserted too. He saw no couples defying the mosquitoes in the pursuit of love, nor any fishermen sitting patiently beside their motionless rods.

Going back to the van, he first opened its doors at the back, then turned it towards the hedge, and then, with great caution, backed it towards the river. He intended to get rid of his load into the water, and meant to bring it as near as possible in order to avoid unnecessary effort.

But he had not the knowledge or experience needed for success. He was used to hard London pavements; he forgot, or never knew, that river banks are often insecure. The van ran back on to an overhang near the rotten staging; the

edge crumbled under its weight. Harry had just time to switch off the engine and jump out of the cab before the back of the van sank into the stream. The bonnet and front wheels alone remained above water, like a swimmer clinging to the edge of a swimming pool.

Harry wasted no time in curses or lamentations. He had to move now and quickly. At any moment a stranger might come on the scene. Where before he could have stood by the van enjoying the evening until the interruption was over, now his predicament would bring instant unwanted help. Before that happened he must get rid of the meat. At all costs he must get rid of it.

Taking off his trousers, shoes and socks, he climbed cautiously over the bonnet and down the sloping submerged roof of the van, until he was standing ankle deep, peering down into the river. Luckily, the doors had not been shut by the water, but were held open by it, pressed outwards by the current. It should not be too difficult to climb down, holding on to them, and by ducking under the water, pull out the sacks from inside.

The water rose coldly about his thighs as Harry let himself slide off the roof of the van. He was a moderate swimmer, able to stay under water long enough to annoy his friends by clutching their legs unaware. He guided himself by the van doors. After one or two unsuccessful tries, coming up for breath between each, he got hold of a sack and drew it out.

There were three sacks in the van that night. The first two Harry pulled out, and swimming with them towards the middle of the river, let them sink to the bottom.

It was getting darker now, and he began to feel the cold. There was only one sack left.

Perhaps he was in too much of a hurry, and went about his work too roughly. Perhaps in any case the weight of the van was too much for the rotten bank. At all events, as he slid under the water for his final effort he felt the van lurch and tip. He had his head and shoulders inside it and was tugging at the third sack when this happened. He knew that the van was slipping further down the bank, but he knew also that the

river was not very deep near the shore. He had tested that before getting rid of the other two sacks. He decided that the van could not move far. At the same time the movement frightened him; he had to hurry.

This was his undoing. Thrusting his hand back to seize one of the doors and thereby get his bearings while he pulled out the unresisting sack, he felt his fingers slip and the next instant his wrist was caught between the door and the van.

Even then he might have freed himself. He should have known he had not much time, only a matter of seconds before his breath gave out. But his mind was obsessed with his guilt; he had to get rid of the evidence. So he pulled the sack out, dropping it to the river bed, and only then he twisted his hand to bring it out the way he had let it slide in.

But it was already too late. The van had been slipping all the time; the door that imprisoned him was jammed hard now against the bank, nipping his wrist tightly. His lungs were bursting and at once fear took charge of his mind. It was too dark, at the lower level to which the van had sunk, for him to see exactly how his wrist lay in the trap. He could not any longer have interpreted what he saw. While he choked, while the icy water flooded into his lungs, and despair filled his heart, he wrenched at his trapped limb; but very soon the surrounding darkness spread into the deepest parts of his mind, the busy current floated off his final breath, and the struggle came at last to a gentle end.

Two countrymen taking a short cut home along the towpath came upon the evidence of the accident. They saw part of the bonnet of what looked like a car resting against the edge of the river, and they found besides, lying on the bank, a pair of old grey flannel trousers, a pair of shoes, and some socks.

One of them stayed on guard while the other went off to the nearest house to call the police. The latter brought an ambulance and also tackle to pull out the machine. They guessed what they would find from the careful description given them by their informant. For not only was he able to give them the

make and colour of the vehicle, but also the whereabouts and fate of the driver. In a voice shaken with horror, he explained how while he and his companion had been searching with their pocket torches the banks and the water of the river for any sign of the owner of the abandoned clothes, they had both seen, floating sole upwards, a car's length behind the half-submerged bonnet, and a few inches below the surface, two naked human feet.

FRENCH LEAVE

XIX

DEREK saw the news of Harry Biggs's death in the paper the next day. This first account of it led him to suppose that Harry had been in the Biggs's family car at the time, and he was surprised to find no mention of Mrs Biggs nor of any other passenger. It seemed strange to him that Harry should be down by the river alone, and that he should drive into the water on a summer night, when there was neither rain nor fog to confuse him. Besides, according to the paper, it was barely dark when he was found.

After brooding over the paragraph for a whole day Derek wrote to Mrs Marshman, ostensibly to ask how Graham was getting on with his paper round, but really to discover more detail of the drowning.

Another two days passed. At the end of that time a letter arrived from Mrs Marshman, and on the same day the inquest opened at Staines and the afternoon papers carried a full account of it.

The inquest was adjourned, after identification of the remains. But not before evidence had been given that it was no private car in which Harry had met his death, but a trade van normally used for the transport of fish from Billingsgate Market to a shop in Vincent Street, Wandsworth. The papers did not name the Wickings, and in view of the short proceedings at the coroner's court, padded out their accounts with a later interview with the bereaved and crippled mother, as they called Mrs Biggs. Derek found all this very strange and somewhat menacing.

Mrs Marshman's letter confirmed his fears. It was a long letter, written in a continuous style, without punctuation, and with far too many capital letters. But the contents were dramatic; the story was told simply and in a clear sequence; it was not difficult to understand.

The first they knew of it, Mrs Marshman said, was when a police car came to the Wickings's shop and having failed to gain an entrance made inquiry of Ben as to where they might be. Earlier she had seen Harry Biggs go off to the Cats' Home on his usual errand, and had seen him return to find the yard gate shut. She had wondered about this at the time, and said to Ben it was queer. When Harry went off in the van, making up his mind all of a sudden, it seemed, she thought he had taken it away to garage it somewhere, instead of leaving it in the road outside the shop. But then the two police cars came; the one that had followed after Harry, and the one that had stopped to knock and then come on to them.

Quite late that night after she and Ben had gone to bed she distinctly heard the telephone bell ringing at the Wickings's shop. It rang for a long time: she thought they must both be out. Even later the police came again; she and Ben had both looked out of the front window and seen their car next door. This time Reg Wicking had come to the door and the officers had gone inside. They stayed about an hour and then left the fish shop and drove away.

The next morning it was their own turn, and a gruelling time they'd had of it. All the old business of Graham's truancy had been revived. They had searched the whole of the premises, they had had the boy up before them. This time he had confessed to finding the meat in the Wickings's storehouse and to taking a bit with his Scout knife before climbing over the fence. He denied stoutly that he had ever entered their place again, or had anything whatever to do with them, except deliver newspapers at their door. He agreed that he had often gone into the yard to deliver the papers at the back door. Miss Wicking had asked him to do so.

Mrs Marshman ended her letter on a note of indignant protest. What right had they to bully an innocent child the way they had Graham? Hadn't they better things to do with their time? And what had it got to do with Harry Biggs pinching the Wickings's van and then drowning himself in it? Good riddance to bad rubbish was what Ben called it.

Young Biggs was a proper spiv, if ever there was one. She was sorry for the poor mother. He was her only child. It was not only the loss, but the disgrace. The old man, George, was no good to her. He had never done anything to train Harry; most likely he encouraged him. It was a sad thing Maud Howard ever took up . . .

Here there were two lines heavily crossed out, but Derek thought he knew what was in them. The letter ended with assurances of Graham's health, and with love from them all.

Derek read and re-read the pages until he knew them by heart. The game was up for the Wickings. But for how many more besides? And how would it all affect Graham? Would he be dragged in to court to give his evidence about that fatal night? And if so, what would become of him? They might not be able to prosecute him, nor send him away to one of their approved schools. But they might put him on probation. They had so many ways of interfering, of keeping a disgraceful past alive to damage a child in the eyes of everyone else. What chance had he of his scholarship if the law grabbed him?

In his own mind, Derek defended his young brother. After all, what had he done that could not, that should not, have been dealt with at home by a sound thrashing from his own father? All this complication of goodwill, of good intention, of schemes for moral reform, of organized training, were so much hot air if parents themselves had no standards. Made desperate by Graham's danger, Derek asked himself where the root cause lay, and was not slow in finding it. Laziness. Sheer, damned bone laziness on the part of father and mother alike. He knew now why he and Graham had been evacuated from home, and why his mother had not come with them. Let other people look after them, train them, feed them. Then other people were always to blame if things went wrong. It was too much trouble to train a child, it needed a strong effort, it took a very long time. They would train a puppy, smack it when it wet the carpet. But not a child, because it had a will of its own, and because there were so many eager old women, and screwy old men, and young

ones too, anxious to take over the job, instead of bringing up kids of their own the natural way.

Derek's anger smouldered for another two days. By degrees the reasoning grew weaker and the resentment more forceful. His ancient grudge against his father, which had been born on the day he first saw him strike Maud Howard's drunken face, was now fully released. Graham's predicament, his possible danger, were all his father's fault. Even now, it seemed, he was taking no steps to protect the boy. He was washing his hands of the whole affair—as usual. Well, that was going to be stopped. He must be made to attend. There was only one person to enforce this, himself. And only one effective method. Scare the daylight out of the old beggar.

The next day Derek stole an automatic pistol with ammunition. By eight o'clock that evening he was knocking at the door of the prefab on the Common.

Mr Howard had heard the story of Harry Biggs's death with no more excitement than was natural from the fact that he had known him personally. The sinister under-currents in the story went by him. They were not reported openly in the Press; moreover, Alf Howard had not visited 'The Bear and Pole' since he joined Mrs Collings. He was completely ignorant of his younger son's connection with the Wickings. The only thing he had on his conscience that evening was his wife's accident. He had not yet visited the hospital, nor had he taken Graham to see his mother. The boy had several times asked to go, not, as he explained, because he wanted to do so, but simply because Derek had got special leave for the purpose, and he thought it was a necessary and important thing to do. Besides, he wanted to see the inside of a hospital. But Mr Howard had been obstinate; he was afraid of the sentimental effect on him of seeing Maudie suffer. His temper, as Mrs Collings did not hesitate to remind him, was not improved by his indecision.

When Derek's knock at the front door echoed through the thin walls of the prefab, he growled from behind his newspaper, "Leave 'em be, whoever it is."

"It might be Graham," said Mrs Collings, looking up from her mending to listen.

"Don't be daft. 'E comes in the back."

"Have it your own way," she answered with irritating smugness.

Mr Howard heaved himself from his chair.

"Just to show you, Mrs Know-all," he said, "I'll open the door myself."

As this was exactly what she wanted, Mrs Collings smiled secretly to herself, bending over the sock in her hand.

"And you needn't sit there, grinning like a lunatic," her protector threw at her as he left the room.

It was not Graham on the doorstep; it was Derek. The latter said curtly, "Can I come in?"

His father, looking him up and down, was proud of his improved appearance. He seemed to have grown in all ways; he looked a real well set-up youngster, twice the man he was when he was called up.

"Come in, son," he said mildly. "It's bin quite a time . . ."

He did not finish his sentence, but instead took Derek to the sitting-room of the prefab.

Mrs Collings and the newcomer nodded coldly to one another. Mr Howard covered up his embarrassment by filling a pipe.

"Is Graham around?" Derek asked.

His voice was unpleasantly tense. Both the others noticed it, exchanging puzzled glances. Mrs Collings' fingers trembled a little at their work. Her new relationship had been singularly free from interference or unpleasantness, but she had always thought this state of things would not last for ever. Now the big scene was on, it seemed.

"No," said Mr Howard, taking his seat again and puffing hard. "'E's gone off with 'is pals somewhere on the Common. Back by nine. That's right, Eva, ain't it?"

"Somewhere on the Common," repeated Derek in a low furious voice. "Somewhere! A fat lot you care what becomes of him. You ought to know where he is. Somewhere! My God!"

"Take it easy, son," said Mr Howard. "You played on your own at 'is age. Why shouldn't he?"

"You never saw me his age. You was at the Front and we was at Stansford. Auntie made us play at home after six. But you don't care. Too damned lazy."

"If you can't think of something better to hand out than abuse of that nature, you can take yourself off, and welcome," said his father, breathing hard. "I'm a patient man as a rule, but I'll not stand for a young whipper-snapper like you telling me where my duty lies."

"Oh, won't you?"

Derek sprang to his feet. The quarrel he sought was on, and his whole spirit was set upon its development. He drove his tongue to more bitter accusation yet.

"Was it your duty to leave home? You know what Mum's like. You're the only one 'as ever kept her straight at all. Since you left she's gone from bad to worse. I've seen it. My own mother!"

"I don't know nothing of that."

Mr Howard still sat, watching, and secretly admiring, the young man's vigour and honesty of purpose. But he was not going to acknowledge any fault, not to a single soul.

"Then you ought to. If you didn't care when you left her, you might have the common decency to go to her now, lying in hospital with her leg smashed up, all through your neglect."

Mr Howard made a rude denial.

"It's a fact. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. What sort of an example are you setting Graham? If it wasn't for the Marshmans, he'd be in serious trouble by now. I suppose you'll tell me you know nothing of that, either?"

"Not a word," said Mr Howard truthfully. Indeed, the police, not being much interested in the boy's connection with the Wickings, now that the whole story lay open to them, had not troubled him in the matter.

Derek enlightened him. He listened to the embittered words with amazement and a newly found fear. What if the boy was right? It would come back on himself if Graham was really

in trouble. And Maudie too? She'd been very much hand in glove with that crowd at 'The Bear and Pole.' If Derek was right it was a real criminal case. His misgivings made him hesitate, which gave Derek the encouragement he needed for his final attack.

"You needn't look so flummoxed," he shouted. "If you had your wits about you you'd have tumbled to it weeks ago when the police brought Graham up here. Why didn't you ask the Welfare Officer what was behind it? She'd have put you wise. Any of them would. But no. You keep out of it. All you want is to avoid trouble, hiding in behind your fancy skirt."

Mrs Collings' head came up with a jerk. She watched Alf's hand clench slowly on the arm of his chair. But he said nothing. All her resentment at her position flared suddenly.

"Are you going to sit there and hear me insulted?" she screamed shrilly

Her intervention had its effect.

"You take that back," said Mr Howard heavily, staring at his son. "Mind your own business for a start. But take back them words."

"It's all on her account you've let things go from bad to worse the way they have," continued Derek, quite reckless by this time. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, the both of you, at your age. It's not as if you was young, that'd be some excuse. Like this it's—it's——"

"You hold your tongue!" shouted Mr Howard, rising slowly in his anger. "I never heard such talk. Is that what they teach you in the Army? You just beg her pardon and mine, and then get out of 'ere!"

"I'll go in my own time. I haven't finished with you yet."

"You leave my house when I tell you!"

"It's not your house. It's just a common . . ."

"Do I 'ave to take my 'and to you?" thundered Mr Howard, beginning to unfasten the heavy belt he wore outside his braces.

Derek was beside himself with rage. But he remembered

that he was armed. He had meant to use his weapon to enforce his father's compliance. He had had some romantic idea of forcing him to the hospital at the point of the gun. But he remembered it now as an aid to defence, and when he drew it and slipped up the safety catch it was for defence that he acted.

But Mr Howard's blood was up too, and he was no more capable of reason at that moment than was his son. The sight of the gun maddened him. He raised his hand to swing his belt over his head.

"Put that down," said Derek. "I'm warning you . . ."

A stream of abuse poured from his father's lips. The belt went up. Mr Howard took a step forward.

"If you don't stop, I fire!"

"You can go to 'ell any way you like. I'll teach you . . ."

"Get back! I mean it!"

At the instant of Mr Howard's attack Derek pressed the trigger. He saw the flash, he saw his father plunge to the floor, he heard Mrs Collings scream, just before the explosion seemed to burst the room apart. Before the smoke cleared Derek had dropped his weapon and was out of the prefab, running blindly across the Common, and cursing and sobbing as he ran.

When he reached the main road again he forced himself to stop. One or two people had already turned to stare after him. He saw them now, as he stood looking round him, still waiting to see if any interesting calamity would develop. But he disappointed them by turning into a public-house, where a double whisky stilled his panic for a time. He did not stay there long, however, nor make the mistake of repeating his drink. He walked away, following the inclination of the moment, and after a time found himself on Chelsea Bridge staring down into the water.

He could not believe what he knew to be true. In his day-dream of the encounter between himself and his father there had been always the threat of violence, but no actual harm done. And yet he had deliberately taken ammunition as well

as the gun. And in the end he had wanted to kill. And had killed.

He leaned on the parapet, feeling sickness sweep over him. What future was there for him now, or for Graham? His bitterest regret, while he allowed his imagination to develop the probable sequence of events to come, was that he had let down the little brother he had tried to protect. What he had done in his mad anger was the ultimate crime. It had been shockingly easy, and this seemed to his bewildered mind the worst betrayal of all.

Presently a policeman, noticing the solitary figure leaning with a disconsolate air on the parapet, with a familiar droop of the head and shoulders, began to saunter casually towards him. Drunk, or would-be suicide, or merely disillusioned romantic, it was all one to him. He would be safer off the bridge. You could never tell what people would do next.

Derek saw the policeman some distance away, approaching with his air of detachment. He moved on at once, controlling a new impulse to run. When he reached the Embankment road he looked back. The policeman had halted on the bridge, at about the position he had left, and was looking over into the river. He would see nothing there, Derek thought. The horror he himself had stared at, and seen floating on the dark water, he had himself brought there with him; it stood between him and his fellows, but its lurid glow was visible only to him, his brain only was shrivelled in that flame.

He wandered on up Sloane Street, through Hyde Park, along the light and noise of Oxford Street, Regent Street, and Trafalgar Square, to the wide solemnities of Whitehall, and the river again at Westminster. Exhausted, he sat on the Embankment, gazing at the County Hall and Waterloo Bridge until another policeman moved him on. Then, up again, he made his way slowly back, with many pauses, along the riverside to Chelsea Bridge, and at five the following morning was knocking at Syd Williams' door.

XX

MRS HOPE, fully dressed, opened the door to him. " 'Oo is it?" she asked in a whisper.

"Derek. Derek Howard. I . . ."

"I remember you. Come inside. What do you want this time of day?"

"What time is it?"

"Five, just gone."

"Only that? I thought it must be later."

He stared at her; his brain was slow with fatigue and remorse and fear.

"You're up very early," he said, with a hint of surprise in his voice.

"We've not been to bed this night. The doctor's still 'ere. Didn't you see 'is car in the road as you come in?"

"Not been to bed?"

She took hold of his arm to push him into the front room among the photographs and the armchairs and the ever-lasting. She closed the door behind her.

"Syd's dying," she said simply.

Derek felt his knees collapse under him. He had to sit down on the nearest chair, and remained there, shaking all over and looking up at the old woman.

"Dr Forrest saw it was the end coming, three days back. 'E's been a brick the way 'e's looked after 'im. Couldn't get 'im to give in at first, in spite of what 'e was suffering. 'Ad to give 'im an injection. But 'e says it won't be long now."

"Can I see him?" Derek whispered.

"I'll ask Jean."

"Oh!"

He understood, with an unbearable pang, that she was trying to preserve the right privacy of death, a pitiful dignity.

"If she'd mind, I'll go. Only Syd—Syd . . ." His voice broke.

"I'll see, son. You stop 'ere."

As she was turning towards the door it was opened from without and Dr Forrest came in. He spoke directly to Mrs Hope without noticing Derek.

"I've given him another injection. It will be the last. I think you had better go back. Mrs Williams will need you."

The old woman made her way out without a word. The doctor turned to follow her, but Derek, getting up shakily, checked him.

"Please, doctor, do you think—can I—I'd like to go up for a minute—I'll keep out of the way . . ."

"Derek Howard!" exclaimed Dr Forrest, in a low, surprised voice. He stood quite still, frowning and staring. "What in the world are you doing here, on such an occasion, at this hour of the morning?"

"I didn't know the time, sir. And I didn't know he was so bad. I only had a card from Jean to say he was back from hospital. I thought that meant he was better. But—could I just see him for a minute, if they wouldn't mind?"

"They are past minding anything," said Dr Forrest.

He looked away from the distracted boy before him, thinking of the three upstairs. They were all withdrawn into the place of separation, where ordinary life was suspended, seeming to have no importance, no certain meaning.

"Come up if you like," he said, recalling himself. "But he may not know you."

Derek hung back to allow Dr Forrest to leave the room first, then followed him up the short, steep flight of stairs to the bedroom.

Though it was light enough in the street to see the numbers on the house doors, the new day had not penetrated to the sick-room. The curtains were drawn, and the electric light was on. There was a close atmosphere there of unending night; a suspension of time while they waited for the change that would end time.

Jean sat on a low chair by the dying man. She did not move when the others entered the room. Her heavy grief

made her more lifeless even than the worn figure of her husband.

Dr Forrest, with a hand on Derek's arm, guided him to the foot of the bed. Mrs Hope passed behind them to the far side. All three stood looking down, separate in their secret thoughts, as people are at a church service.

For Mrs Hope and Dr Forrest this was no new experience, and they had come to look upon it as a solemn but not fearful event; harsh indeed, in this case, because Syd was young and in himself worth more than many of his fellows; tragic, too, in the lives that would be cut off from his support by his passing. But now that the agony was over and death accepted, a matter for relief on that account, if on no other.

But to Derek the whole scene was one of the most extreme horror. Though he had sometimes seen a fatal accident in the street, he had never before witnessed a death in illness. The drama and excitement of the one had always covered up the reality of death; it had been so full of action, of bustling attempts to rescue the victim, lively measures to bring him to life, or at least to remove terror from his vicinity. In Syd's prim bedroom, clean, tidy, and airless, drama was buried under a load of simple, decorous self-control, or rather self-forgetfulness. Defeat was fully acknowledged. And he revolted from this, as much on his own account as on that of his friend. It could not be true; it could not really be happening. Not to Syd, his one real friend, the only being he had ever brought himself to confide in. If he lost Syd the world had indeed let him down. Clutching the end of the bed with his hands, he let his face sink down upon them.

"Look," said Mrs Hope in a whisper. "'E's looking at 'er!"

Derek raised his head again, hearing a sharp, indrawn breath from Dr Forrest at his side.

Syd's eyes, which had been closed, were open. In their grey emaciated frame they looked larger than they had in health. They were fixed now on Jean's poor, swollen, tear-blotched face, compelling her to look back at him. It was a straight

glance, intelligent, humorous, the whole strong, cool, masterful character clear in that gaze; yet suffused with such a glow of loving care, of tenderness, of pity, that all of them felt their hearts lift at it.

The eyelids closed gently, as if reluctant to shut out that light. Five minutes later Syd Williams was dead.

Dr Forrest took Derek downstairs. The boy seemed scarcely capable of movement and looked to be on the point of collapse. Pushing him into a chair, he told him brusquely to get his head down between his knees. But Derek did not seem to hear him.

"I can't believe it," he kept repeating stupidly, staring at the wall before him. "I can't believe it. I can't. I had to tell him. I wanted to tell him . . ."

For the first time Dr Forrest realized how strangely the young man had come upon the scene when he did. He asked sharply, "Where did you spring from? What were you doing?"

Derek only said, "I was waiting till it was light. I didn't know it was so early. I thought it'd be about seven. I can't understand it. . . . Not Syd! After all he'd been through in the war."

"There is nothing *fair* in Nature," said the doctor shortly. "No rights, no obligations, no privileges, certainly no justice, as we think of it. Those things are invented by men to deal with other men. Nature is a free-for-all, and less cruel, because without malice."

"This was cruel. Too cruel. If it's like you say, then what's the point of it all?" said Derek desperately.

Dr Forrest looked at him. He had been deeply moved by Syd's manner of dying: moved, and strangely exalted. It led him to speak more freely than was usual with him.

"You saw Syd look at his wife when to all intents and purposes he was already dead? You saw the fire and vigour of that look? He was pulseless, remember, and hardly breathing."

"Yes," Derek whispered.

"Then you have seen the indestructible spirit," said Dr

Forrest firmly. "If that has brought you no understanding, no access of faith, then nothing will."

Derek's response was immediate, but to Dr Forrest most unexpected. He slid to his knees on the floor and covering his face with his hands sobbed, "I've got to go to the police. I've got to go to the police! I've killed my father!"

For a few seconds there was silence in the little room, then Dr Forrest clapped a hand on Derek's shoulder.

"Get up," he said roughly. "Now tell me what all this is about."

Derek told him. He described his accumulating grudge against his father, ending with the latter's neglect of common decency in not visiting his wife in hospital. He confessed his knowledge of Graham's part in the Wickings' crime and his fear for the sequel. Dr Forrest cut him short.

"Yes, yes, I understand. You say you killed your father. Was his—was this woman there at the time?"

"Yes."

"You ran off at once?"

"Yes."

"And have wandered about all night?"

"Yes."

"Have any of the police spoken to you?"

"Only one or two to move me on."

"That all?"

"Yes."

"Look," said Dr Forrest. "I don't think I should go rushing off to a Police Station straight away. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll drive you back to this prefab where you did your shooting. If the police are in charge, you can give yourself up there and then. It'll look better that way."

"O.K., sir," said Derek in a very subdued voice. "If it won't be too far out of your way."

"It won't. Now stay where you are while I speak to Mrs Hope. I won't be long."

There was nothing more for him to do in that house but give the death certificate to Mrs Hope and advise her about

Jean, for whom he left some sleeping tablets to secure her from the shock of reaction.

Then, hurrying Derek into his car before the young man could change his mind, he drove away down the street.

XXI

WHEN the door of the prefab slammed shut behind the fleeing figure of Derek Howard, Mrs Collings sat perfectly motionless for quite five minutes. At the end of that time she took up her needle again, saying in her most acid tones, "Why don't you get up, Alf? You don't 'alf look a sketch lying there all of a sprawl."

Mr Howard, who had not known how to end his discomfiture, gathered himself up slowly.

"The murdering young fool," he said in a rather shaky voice. "'E might 'ave killed me."

"Or me," said Mrs Collings. "You never think of anyone but yourself, do you? I might 'ave been shot just as well as you."

"'E was aiming at me," said Mr Howard. "Luck: I got down when I did. Second nature, still, it seems."

"'E missed. Not what you'd call a crack shot, is he?"

Mrs Collings made a noise of disgust, to express her complete contempt for Derek's ability with firearms. Mr Howard, after rocking a little on his feet, got a cigarette between his trembling lips, and after lighting it and drawing in several calming breaths, walked over to the wall, where a neat round hole marked where the bullet had left the prefab.

"Lucky there was no one outside," he said. "This wall didn't 'ave much stopping power as I can see."

"Did you expect it would?"

Mr Howard did not answer this. He put his eye to the hole, with a child's interest in small views of the world.

"Better stop it up before they notice it when they call for the rent," Mrs Collings suggested.

"They never notice nothing."

"Better stop it up all the same."

"Why? Afraid of a draught?"

She smiled unwillingly.

"Don't be an old softy. You get something on the outside, and I'll move this picture over the place. We don't want people noticing a hole and casting back to what they thought was a back-fire."

"You're right there," said Mr Howard. "I must say it give me a turn."

"You should 'ave seen 'im run," said Mrs Collings. "Bet 'e thinks 'e's done you in. What was 'e doing 'ere, anyway? On leave again, or deserted?"

"Not like Derek to do a thing like that," replied Mr Howard. "Nor this," he added, gazing out again through the hole. "I don't know what come over 'im. I only 'ope it don't make trouble for 'im."

He went slowly to the door and out into the small enclosure round the prefab. Here he searched the ground for some minutes, and, failing to find what he sought, went through the gate to look about further off. It was a quiet evening, and there was no one near to ask him what he was doing. In the end he had to give up the hopeless quest for the bullet. He went back to the house, found some thick cardboard and a tube of plastic wood and made a rough repair of the hole. He decided to touch it up the next day with white paint, but for the present it would have to do.

He had only just finished it when Graham came home from Vincent Street. He was surprised to see his father standing at the side of the prefab, but he passed behind him, giving him a wide berth, and made for the back door.

"Graham!" said Mr Howard suddenly.

"Yes, Dad?"

"Where 'ave you been?"

"Playing with Bob first of all. Then down at Marshmans'."

As his father simply stared at him, he went on uneasily: "It was the day to see to the aquarium. I always . . ."

"O.K. O.K. Get along in. Tell Auntie she can make me some cocoa along with yours. I'm tired."

"Yes, Dad."

More astonished at his father's tone than he had been at any time since the morning he came to the prefab, Graham ran in to give the message to Mrs Collings.

"What's up with Dad?" he asked eagerly.

"Nothing that I know of."

She was lying, Graham decided, but she would stick to it. He found the general atmosphere ominous, but impossible to understand. So he sat down quietly near the wireless, resisting a temptation to fiddle with the knobs.

Presently Mrs Collings called from the kitchen, "Your cocoa's ready. You can go and call in your father, if 'e's still outside."

Mr Howard was still outside, leaning back against the wall of the prefab, smoking a second cigarette which he had lit from the first. He was gazing out past the plane trees to the distant road, where the street lamps shone now in the gathering dusk, and car lamps flashed as they went by.

Graham went up to him, not liking to break a silence so heavy and so mysterious. As he stood there, wondering how to deliver his message, Mr Howard's hand came out to rest on his shoulder and to draw him nearer.

"Mother's still in hospital," he said in a low voice.

"Yes, Dad."

"You knew that, did you?"

"Derek wrote. He said her leg was coming along nicely. It's a plaster job, he said."

"Oh, 'e wrote, did 'e? You never showed us the letter."

"He said to better not."

Mr Howard nodded. His hand gripped his small son's shoulder hard.

"Did Derek say anything about me in the letter?"

"No. Why should 'e?"

"You must 'ave been wondering why 'e never took you up to see 'er?"

Graham knew his mother was still the subject of the conversation.

"Do you want to go?"

The boy answered in a scarcely audible voice, "Not on my own, I wouldn't."

"Would you, if I went with you?"

Graham nodded eagerly. He had no particular wish to see his mother, but he wanted to be able to boast at school of his visit and to the Marshmans of his father's action. He had heard too much of their criticism.

"It'll be visiting day tomorrow," said Mr Howard. "I'll 'ave to take time off, and so will you. I'll come up to the school for you. Will that suit?"

"Super," said Graham, enthusiastically.

"Keep it to yourself, then," said his father, giving his shoulder another squeeze. "Always avoid unpleasantness, that's my motto."

Before Graham could say anything, a harsh voice cried to them from the back door.

"Your cocoa's stone cold by this time. I hope you don't expect me to warm it up for you; loitering about out there in the dark. It's after your bedtime, Graham. You just come in, wherever you are."

The two turned guiltily to obey.

"No 'eart," said Mr Howard to the night sky. "There's only two kinds of women, son. Too much 'eart, and too little. I don't know which is worst. Never found a 'appy mean, yet."

The cocoa was stone cold, and Mrs Collings had not warmed it up.

By the time Dr Forrest had driven back into the main road he had changed his plan of action, but he did not at once tell Derek what he proposed to do. Instead he drove quietly to his own house, and having arrived there, ordered the young man to go inside. While Derek rested in the waiting-room of the surgery, Dr Forrest found him something to eat and drink. If there was really any serious trouble ahead for young Howard, he thought, the boy was in no fit state to meet it after his night of wandering and the subsequent shock of Syd's

death. The doctor wanted to postpone any further shocks until he knew more himself of what nature they were likely to be.

Derek submitted with a numb obedience very unusual in him. His mind was obsessed, and his feelings overwhelmed, by the tragedy he had just witnessed. The earlier tragedy, terrible and squalid, hideous in its unnatural content, had sunk into that region to which he had tried to thrust it all through the long night. His personal guilt had become confused with the evil he saw in the bare fact of Syd's death. It was as if he had killed, not his father, but his friend.

Dr Forrest brought him strong coffee, and when he had drunk some of it, made him eat also.

"I don't know what there is in store for you," he said. "But you can't stand anything at your age on an empty stomach."

"I don't like giving all this trouble," Derek mumbled.

"You aren't. I am occupying myself profitably until my family get up. It is much too late to go to bed again. Besides, I was not called until after four. And I am used to this sort of thing."

"Graham . . ." began Derek, but Dr Forrest stopped him.

"Whatever happened last night at the prefab, after you left, Graham must have missed it."

"He might have been back any time. It was getting on for nine."

"You think of your own position a bit more, and worry about Graham a bit less. It seems to me you are the chief headache of the moment."

"It can't be real," said Derek. "I can't believe anything that's happened since I left camp last evening."

"I want to wait here till the house begins to move," said the doctor, taking no notice of Derek's words, "and then I'll run you up to the Common while my wife is cooking my breakfast. That do?"

"It's very good of you to take all this trouble, sir," said Derek humbly.

"I'll leave you, now. You'll find plenty of magazines here

to look at. I may as well take the opportunity to get one or two letters written while we wait."

"Very good, sir."

Having disposed of Derek in this way at the back of the house, where the waiting-room had a view of the garden, Dr Forrest went to his surgery, which overlooked the drive in front. From its window he saw Graham arrive with the newspaper and run off with a bouncing, cheerful step that did not suggest any recent trouble at home. He tiptoed into the hall, took the paper from the letter-box and retreated again to the surgery. A crime as spectacular as the one Derek claimed to have committed would surely find a place even in *The Times*.

But there was no mention of it anywhere. Taking this with the absence of any police search for the young man, Dr Forrest began to wonder if he had invented the whole story. His curiosity was thoroughly aroused. He went upstairs to tell his wife of his immediate plans, and then at once set off with Derek in the direction of the Common.

There was no crowd of sightseers outside the prefab, no faces at the neighbouring windows. Derek and the doctor walked up to the front door and the latter knocked, while Derek stood stiffly at his side.

Mrs Collings, opening the door with a violent movement, took a step forward as if she knew that an enemy awaited her, and meant to get in her attack first. Seeing Dr Forrest, she checked herself, with a hand on each doorpost.

"Good morning," said Dr Forrest.

But before he could say any more Derek thrust roughly past them both and disappeared through the sitting-room door.

"Come out of that!" screamed Mrs Collings, beside herself with rage. "The idea, after the way you be'aved last night! Of all the bloody cheek, this . . ."

Leaving the front door open, she turned on her heel and dashed in pursuit. Dr Forrest went in quietly, shutting the door behind him. He found the other two facing one another across the sitting-room table.

"Where is he?" Derek was demanding in a low tense voice.

"Where would 'e be at eight of the morning? At work, of course."

"At work?"

"You don't imagine you 'it 'im, do you?" said Mrs Collings, with enormous scorn. "Fancy yourself as a shot, I suppose?"

She moved to the wall, and turning aside a picture that hung there, showed him the hole the bullet had made.

"'E's plugged it on the outside, not to call attention to it, see?"

She went to the fireplace next, and moving a large china vase that stood there, revealed the gun.

"'E's took the ammo out of it," she said. "So you won't be a danger to no one else. Now you just take the thing and 'op it. D'you 'ear me? If you aren't gone inside two minutes, I'll call the police and give you in charge."

She meant what she said, but before her words were fairly out of her mouth, Derek had sunk down on the floor in a dead faint.

When he came to himself he saw that he was alone in the room with Dr Forrest. The latter looked at him severely.

"You ought to consider yourself pretty lucky," he said.

Derek sat up shakily, covering his face with his hands. The doctor helped him to a chair.

"I've had a word with this woman," went on Dr Forrest. "She tells me you did your father no injury whatever. Also that Graham did not come home until the excitement was all over, and he has not been told what happened. Now listen to me. You are not fit to go straight back to camp. There will be plenty of trouble in store for you there. I am sorry for you. I think you have had altogether too much on your shoulders for a good many years, and you are still very young. I am going to stretch a point. I am going to get in touch with your unit and say you left without getting leave because you were upset over family affairs. That you intended to be back in time for parade this morning, but you were taken ill. I shall try to get an extension of sick leave for two days. You'll lose

some good marks when you turn up tomorrow, but I expect you'll get over that. No, don't say anything. I shall take you along to Vincent Street now, and drop you there. I strongly advise you to go to bed for the rest of the day."

"I couldn't sleep," said Derek simply. After a minute or two he said, "It's visiting day at the hospital. I think I'll go up and see Mum."

Dr Forrest nodded.

"That might do just as well," he said. "In which case you can take your certificate to the Police Station yourself, and get them to ring up your unit. They'll be getting quite used to that by this time. But you'd better not have the gun on you. It shows wherever you put it."

"What'll I do with it, sir?"

"I'll take care of it," said Dr Forrest. "You can fetch it from my house tomorrow. No doubt you know how to replace it where you got it from. I hope you are punished for it. You deserve to be punished for thinking up such a film gangster act."

"I have been punished," Derek muttered. His eyes filled with tears, and he turned his back on the doctor.

That afternoon, feeling bemused and light-headed from his recent experiences, Derek found himself at the hospital, completing his own family circle.

From the door of the ward he saw his father sitting at his mother's bedside with Graham opposite, obviously intent upon understanding the complicated mechanics of her leg extension. They did not see him until he was close at hand. Then Mr Howard got slowly to his feet.

Derek looked him in the eyes.

"I must have been up the wall last night," he said. "I don't know what come over me."

"Forget it, son," his father answered gruffly. "You'll upset your mother."

"Whatever are you two nattering about?" said Mrs Howard brightly. "Give us a kiss, Derek. Graham can't keep from laughing at the way my leg sticks up. Unfeeling young monkey. Just look at 'im now!"

She was half laughing herself as she spoke, partly from nervousness and partly from pleasure. Seeing them all there together quite took her breath away. They all knew so much, even Graham, that would never be discussed again, except when they lost their tempers with one another. It made her feel quite giddy to be at the centre of all this trivial talk, and to know finally that however much she let them down they were still hers, and always would be. Her sentimental heart, so ready to overflow in good-nature, foolishness, or vice, swelled so that the easy tears ran down her cheeks as she lifted her face to Derek.

"'E says 'e's come 'ome to stay," she whispered. "I'm to pack up 'The Bear and Pole,' 'e says."

"Good idea for a start," muttered Derek.

"I'm on the water-wagon for keeps," his mother went on. "This lot's been a lesson to me. I wouldn't swallow a thimbleful of the stuff, not if you was to pour it down my throat."

"That's the job."

She saw the unbelief in his face and pushed him from her.

"Alf knows I mean it," she protested. "Don't you, Alf?"

"That's right, old girl. Take no notice of them two. We'll make a do of it between us. You and me. See if we don't."

He had said it so many times before, and so had Maudie. But this time she really seemed to mean it. She was looking fine, better than she had for years. Younger too, without all the make-up. There was something about Maudie—there always had been. Eva Collings wasn't a patch on her; none of the others ever had been. Well, it was all over with Eva now. He was back with Maudie; this time, for keeps.

XXII

THAT evening the Howard family returned to their home in Vincent Street. Graham stayed below in the street to give the joyful news to his friends, while the two men went upstairs. Derek was not altogether surprised to find that

his father had never removed the whole of his possessions from the rooms there. They were recovered amid the confusion and filth, showing that though Maud Howard had turned much of her own property into cash to supply her increasing thirst, she had touched none of these things. Only the wireless had gone, and she had evidently considered this common property and therefore hers to dispose of.

The first thing Mr Howard said on re-entering his home was, "This is no place for the kid."

Derek agreed.

"I've got to go back tomorrow morning." Dr Forrest said he'd do what he can for me, but the sooner I get back the better."

"What about the gun?"

"Doctor took it. I'm to fetch it from his place tomorrow. He's a real gentleman. He might have turned me in over this. He only said he hoped I'd catch it at camp. But I won't. I'll get it back the same way I got it out."

"I buried the ammo," said Mr Howard. "I thought if they was on to you it'd look better if there wasn't any."

"Thanks, Dad."

Derek walked over to the window and with his back to his father muttered, "I'm sorry for what I done."

"We'll say no more of that, son," answered Mr Howard, equally embarrassed. And indeed neither of them ever again referred to the incident.

After a suitable pause Derek turned back into the room.

"You were right what you said about Graham," he began. "Mum won't be back for weeks yet. I can help clear this lot up now, but you're at work all day, and he needs someone around to keep him on the tracks. Not to mention his homework. Why don't you ask Mrs Marshman if she'd take him for a week or two? The old man may not like the idea, but she'd jump at it. She's fond of the kid. You can tell that the way she keeps looking at him."

"Never 'ad none of 'er own," agreed Mr Howard.

"Why don't we go up for the paper now and ask her?"

They went together. It was after closing time at the shop,

but Mrs Marshman came to the side door, in answer to their knock.

"It fair took my breath away," she told her husband later. "There they were, the two of them, just as if nothing 'ad 'appened all these weeks. 'Well, Alf,' I said. 'You *are* a stranger! 'Can we 'ave a word with you, Lil?' 'e said, just as if I'd not spoken. 'It's about young Graham,' 'e said. So I asked them in, and they waited on till you come."

"Did you understand from Alf 'e'd given up this Mrs Collings?"

"For good and all," replied his wife. "'E's 'ad 'is fling, and much good it's done 'im, I don't think. But now 'e's made it up with Maudie there won't be no more trouble. I doubt 'e'll ever break out again."

She spoke as if Mr Howard had been suffering from some infection to which he had now acquired immunity.

"It's not as if she was young and pretty," went on Mrs Marshman, reflectively, "like the last one."

Mr Marshman stared at her.

"'Ave you taken leave of your senses?" he demanded.

"No, Ben. You never notice much, that's all, and hear less. I've no use for gossip in the ordinary way, so I'm thankful you don't. But I've always been one to keep my eyes open, and then you hear things in the shop—if you're me, I mean."●

"I'd never 'ave said to look at 'im 'e'd be much of a lady's man," pursued Mr Marshman, who was shocked out of his usual indifference. "What can they see in 'im, I'd like to know?"

"Women are all fools where men are concerned," answered Mrs Marshman unhelpfully. "Don't worry your head over Alf. This'll 'ave been a lesson to 'im, I shouldn't wonder."

Mr Marshman changed the subject to one he really cared about.

"I suppose 'e got round you before I come in?"

"No, 'e didn't, if you want to know. But there wouldn't 'ave been need to get round me. I'm fond of the child, Ben; 'ave been since that night the poor little mortal broke into

this room. I'm only too pleased it was Alf, or perhaps Derek, thought of asking us."

"Well, we certainly know the worst," said her husband grudgingly. "Might be worse, I suppose. It'll pay us, over and above getting back what we give 'im for the paper round."

"Half what you give him. He's got to 'ave a bit of pocket money or 'e won't go on with it, and why should 'e? That's only fair. You just listen to yourself on the need for incentives, next time a customer lets off steam."

"Oh well," said Mr Marshman resignedly, "Anything for a quiet life. But don't you start waiting on that kid. If I find you neglecting yourself on his account . . ."

"Neglecting you, you mean. Afraid of having your nose put out of joint, aren't you?"

"We've done well enough so far with no brats about the place."

"That we haven't." Mrs Marshman drew a long breath. "If it wasn't me that couldn't 'ave them, you'd be a father all right, even if you never knew where you'd slipped up. I'd 'ave gone for one, somehow, whatever it entailed."

"'Ave you taken leave of your senses?" cried Mr Marshman, startled into repeating his former accusation.

"No. I've stood a lot from you, Ben Marshman. There's a lot of things about me you've never understood, because you've never cared to see yourself in a poor light."

"And how, if I may be so bold to ask, did you know you couldn't ever bear a child?" he asked.

"How d'you think? Went to the doctor's, of course. And got sent up to hospital. I went through it, I don't mind telling you. And all to no purpose. They said I might be lucky, but not to build any 'opes. I cried my eyes out that night. But you never even woke up."

There was silence for a few minutes in the little shop parlour. Mr Marshman looked so disconcerted that his wife broke out laughing.

"You needn't take it to heart now," she cried. "Too late, by a long chalk. Besides, there's Graham. He's like a son to

me, that child. There's nothing I wouldn't do for the kid. Having 'im right in the place was all it needed."

"Got me just where you wanted me, 'aven't you?" replied her husband with spiteful emphasis.

"Jealous again? Turn it up, mate," said Mrs Marshman.

She stood up and went over to him, resting a fat hand on his shoulder.

"You'll never regret it," she said softly.

He patted her hand in return. Perhaps he had made a mistake, he thought, but it was all because he thought so much of her. He had never dared take the risk of losing her with a child. He had never thought of having children as a natural event, but always as a terrible risk, mysterious, death-dealing. She had come through the time of danger and was safely beyond it. To have Graham to live with them was a way to stop her never-ending reproaches, once and for all. An easy way, he thought. He saw now for the first time how he had wronged her, even if she was right in what she said about herself. Well, Graham would make it up to her, and in time, perhaps, he might even take to the youngster himself.

Graham stayed at home that night, but when he collected the newspapers the next morning Derek was there with several big parcels of his belongings to hand over to Mrs Marshman.

"I got his breakfast," Derek explained. "So he'll come on to you after the end of school today, if that's convenient. He gets his dinner in school. I won't be back for a while, but I know he's in good hands with you. It's set my mind at rest, Mrs Marshman, this has."

"I think it's wonderful what you've done for him all along," she answered, touched by his earnestness. "If you treat your wife as good as you have 'im, she'll be a lucky woman."

Derek had nothing to say to this. He blushed and fidgeted with his service cap.

"There was just one thing," he said. "It's those Wickings, next door. I read in the inquest on Harry Biggs it was their van he was drowned in. I wouldn't like Graham to go anywhere near them. I don't much like . . ."

"You needn't trouble your head about the Wickings," said Mrs Marshman. "No end of a sensation last night after you'd left. I wonder you didn't 'ear the commotion your end of the street."

'What commotion?'"

"They've arrested 'er," she answered. "Took 'er out of the house, just after eleven. Screaming 'er 'ead off."

"And Reg?"

"'E wasn't there. Didn't you know 'e's not been back the last three days? They was both out that Sunday Harry Biggs was drowned. At least she was there till 'e took the van, not after, and she didn't come in till near midnight. Reg come 'ome late, too. But 'e's not been seen since."

Derek swore forcibly and apologized.

"Don't worry. That's nothing to what Ben said when I told 'im the latest. It's my belief," said Mrs Marshman, "that it's Reg they're really after, and now she's gone they think 'e'll come back. But I don't. I think 'e left 'er to bear the brunt. Just like a man if 'e did."

Graham was too excited that night to sleep. He lay in his new room staring at the brass knobs of his old-fashioned bedstead. His room was at the back of the house, overlooking the garden, and having pulled back his curtains and opened the window, as he had been used to do at the prefab, he lay back on his clean pillow-case, comparing the furniture here, so large, solid, and unfashionable, with Mrs Collings's gim-crack deal suites, and deciding that it was very superior in every way. There was enough light in the room, from the glow of the city outside, to show him the outline of each piece. The washstand in particular fascinated him. It had a marble slab on top with a hole into which the basin fitted. Below, a wooden crosspiece expanded into a circle at the centre, designed to hold a chamber pot. Behind the marble slab the back of the washstand curved and twisted in a complicated pattern of scrolls and knobs. Graham thought it one of the handsomest pieces of furniture he had ever seen.

He went over the events of his day: the long hours of school,

waiting for the time when he could go to the Marshmans for his tea; the special meal in the shop parlour with the fish looking out at them from the aquarium; he with his back to the window, sitting between his new guardians, who occupied each end. Afterwards he had helped Mrs Marshman to clear the table and had then done his home-work while she sat with her knitting, not looking at him, but filling the room with her content and her affection, so that the sums and exercises arranged themselves without any effort. After that he had carried his own jug of hot water upstairs and washed at the wonderful washstand, and Mrs Marshman had come up to kiss him and tuck in the bedclothes and draw the curtains, which he had opened again as soon as she was safely downstairs.

He dozed at last, waking himself each time he turned over in the unfamiliar bed.

And then, suddenly, he was wide awake, struggling to know where he was, with a clear picture in his mind of the night of the storm and of himself creeping along the garden fence towards the window of the room above which he now lay. He listened hard, knowing he was in bed, yet hearing his own footsteps on the flagged path.

Then he was fully awake. He was in the Marshman's back bedroom, above the shop parlour, and there was so . . . one in their garden making his way towards the house.

Very quietly he got out of bed and approached the window to look out. He was right, of course. There was a man below, intent upon getting in through the same window he had used himself. In addition he recognized the man. It was the brother of his enemy—Miss Wicking's brother, Reg.

When he thought of Reg he ran back to the bed, to jump under the bedclothes and hide. But a thought stopped him. Reg was climbing into the room where the aquarium was. Suppose he saw the fish. Suppose he did them an injury on purpose? His business was with dead, not living fish. Suppose he turned off the air current, or poisoned the water? Perhaps he had come for that. Graham shuddered as he thought of these dreadful possibilities.

Then common sense and a shrewd Cockney knowledge of men came to his aid. He had heard of Miss Wicking's arrest and Reg's disappearance. The man had been hiding and was now trying to escape. He would need money. He had come to steal from the Marshmans.

Graham knew at once what he must do. Turning his door handle without a sound he crept along the short landing to the Marshmans' room. As he slipped inside it he heard the door below stairs open and saw the flickering beam of a torch below the second door that led into the shop. There was no time to lose. Reg would empty the till and then make his escape.

The Marshmans took a lot of waking, but Graham succeeded in the end in rousing them. At first Mr Marshman was angry, thinking he was imagining things; he could hardly restrain him from speaking aloud. But Mrs Marshman saw the boy meant what he said.

"If 'e's right you've got to call the police," she said. "You better go down and see."

"I'll 'ave that window barred tomorrow," said Mr Marshman. "All these years no trouble at all, and now two forced entries within a couple of months."

"Do what you like tomorrow," insisted Mrs Marshman, "but for the love of mike go down before 'e gets away."

Mr Marshman obeyed. He had in his hand a sparnel that Graham recognized. He had pulled on his jacket over his pyjamas as before. Only this time Graham was behind him, creeping down with his hand in that of Mrs Marshman.

They were only just in time. A man's figure was at the door of the shop, reaching for the last bolt, which he eased back just as Mr Marshman entered.

The latter did the first thing that occurred to him. It was also the most sensible thing to do in the circumstances. He switched on all the lights in rapid succession.

Reg Wicking, for it was indeed he, swore long and fiercely. The lights not only blinded him; they spelled disaster. He leaped for the switches. But Mr Marshman, standing before them, met him with an upraised hand.

"Out of my way!" shouted Reg. "Or you've got it coming to you."

"He's got a knife!" screamed Mrs Marshman.

Graham saw the enemy spring, he saw Mr Marshman rock on his feet. Then he was through the shop door and tearing down the street towards a uniformed figure standing not far off.

"Come quick!" he gasped, clutching at the constable's sleeve. "Reg Wicking's in our shop and he's gone for Mr Marshman with a knife!"

The constable, who had already seen the lights go on in the shop, was prepared to act at once. At this moment he heard a distant scream. He needed no more convincing. In a very few seconds he was inside the shop and his truncheon brought off the blow Mr Marshman with his spanner had failed to deliver.

In no time at all other uniformed figures were there, and when order had been restored, Reg laid out on the floor to recover, and a police car sent for to take him away, it was explained that a close watch had been kept on that part of the street since the arrest of Miss Wicking the day before. Reg had been expected to return.

At this point the constable recognized Graham.

"You're the boy was here before."

"Yes, sir."

Graham had also recognized the constable.

"He's stopping with us at present," said Mrs Marshman.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course we're sure," said Mr Marshman.

"Staying in the house?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"When I say yes," said Mr Marshman, "I mean YES."

"O.K., O.K.," said Constable Newson. "I only wanted to make sure."

Presently the police car arrived to take away Reg Wicking. The detective-inspector in charge of the case came with it. He questioned the Marshmans, who could tell him very little, and then Graham, who was bursting with information.

"My room looks out the back," he said, importantly. "I heard him in the garden. Then I got up and looked out the window and I see him climbing in. So I went along and called up Mr Marshman. I knew who it was, see?"

"You did, did you?"

Graham said nothing. They were not going to catch him out that way.

"As you know so much, perhaps you can tell us where he's been the last three days."

"Only three days! Did you know where he was before that?" asked Mr Marshman in an interested voice. "'E's not been at the fish shop since the Sunday Harry Biggs was drowned. That I know for a fact."

"On the contrary, he came back here three days ago, very late, and his sister let him in. But she was alone in the house the next day, when we came for the pair of them. She swore she didn't know where he'd gone. She meant it, too; called him everything under the sun. No one had left the house; he wasn't there."

"I know where he was," said Graham excitedly. "Bet I know where he was."

"Let's have it, then."

"In the air-raid shelter at the bottom of their yard. Bet you didn't look there, mister."

The angry gleam in the officer's eye was ample recompense for all he had made him suffer, Graham decided.

"Think yourself very smart, don't you?" said the inspector. "Anything else you can tell us about the shelter?"

"It's where they kept the meat," said Graham. "I mean, I guess it's where . . ."

"Sure," said the inspector. "You don't really know, of course. Nor did we, naturally, when we were waiting for him to come out. Only we didn't expect him to come by this way," he added, half-apologetically, to Mrs Marshman.

"It was thanks to our boy you've got him now," she answered. "Air-raid shelter or no air-raid shelter."

She drew Graham to her side with an arm round his shoulders.

"Your boy? Isn't it Graham Howard?"

"That's right," said Mr Marshman stiffly.

"He saved your life tonight when Reg went for you," his wife told him sternly. "If 'e 'adn't nipped out when 'e did and got help you mightn't be 'ere now. Of course he's our boy, from now on."

Mr Marshman's face expanded in a sheepish grin as he stretched out a large hand to ruffle the hair on the top of Graham's head.

XXIII

THE double event of the arrest of the Wickings in Vincent Street and of Charlie Bentham at his furniture depot gave the Press a front-page column. This included a photograph of the brave twelve-year old, Graham Howard, who, reacting promptly to the discovery of the black-marketeer, had called the police and saved the life of his benefactor.

Among those who read this news with the deep thrill of local knowledge was Netta Smith. Lingered over their breakfast cups of tea after Mr Smith had gone to work, she and her mother shared the newspaper between them. They fell to Netta's part to see the paragraph.

"Look who's here!" she exclaimed, showing the page to her mother.

"Who is it? I'm sure I don't recognize the face," answered Mrs Smith.

"Derek's young brother."

"Derek Howard?"

"Yes. I know it's him, because he was always on about the kid. Crazy over him. Soppy, I always thought it."

"I never did think he was cut out for you, Netta. No class, really. Not like Eugene."

Netta looked away, then looked back.

"He's not real class, either. I've found out something. Eugene isn't his real name."

"Well, I never!"

"It's Ernest, really. He uses the other at the Art School. I've found out something else too. I'm not the only one."

Mrs Smith put down her cup briskly.

"Then the sooner you turn it in the better. That sort's no good to any girl. I must say, though, you do surprise me. I'd never have thought it of him."

"No more wouldn't I."

"Time you were off, my girl," her mother urged. She was not going to have a pretty kid like Netta moping over a worthless boy or two. "Plenty more where those two come from. Get going, or you'll be late at the office."

Netta sighed, but habit was strong. Besides, she could and did continue the discussion of her affairs at the office where she worked. All that day she thought about Derek and the unreliable Eugene, whose real name was Ernest. When she left the office in the evening she determined to call at the Howards' home in Wandsworth. The newspaper had given her their address. She had no difficulty in finding the place.

But her visit was a waste of time. Derek was in Aldershot, the people on the next floor told her; his father had gone up to the hospital to see Mrs Howard, and Graham had gone to live with the owners of the tobacconist's shop down the road. Her newspaper had not told her that.

For a few seconds she thought of pursuing Graham there. But she restrained herself. Derek would never hear of it, so nothing would be gained. The case as far as the Press was concerned was over. Any hope she might have had, if she had still been Derek's girl, of getting her own photograph published, was also gone. She was honest enough to see that it was all her own fault.

On her return home she had to explain to her mother why she was so late. The latter lost her temper.

"~~De~~meaning yourself in that way," she stormed. "I wonder you could bring yourself to go to such a low quarter. This is all the thanks I get, I suppose, for bringing you up to take some pride in yourself. All thrown away for a bit of sensational news in the papers."

Her mother was so nearly right in this, and yet so very wrong, that Netta's patience, too, gave way.

"If you didn't put on so much side we might have better friends," she retorted. "What is Dad, when all's said and done? I don't see we've any call to be snobs."

"Well, of all the insulting, ungrateful . . ."

Mrs Smith's rage choked her, and she stood panting and glaring, with a hand pressed to her overcharged bosom.

"I shouldn't excite yourself, if I was you," said Netta spitefully. "You might get a heart attack at your age."

She went out of the room without looking back, only adding, as she went, "I shall write Derek, and go out with him too, when he comes on leave I'll tell him about Eugene. Laugh him off, that'd be best. Derek'll understand. He's worth six of Eugene, any day."

She really meant what she said. Somehow Graham's brave act, and its public reward, had altered her values.

All that evening she composed and wrote to Derek a long account of her feelings, her mistakes, her changed ideas. She did it out in rough, in short-hand, in her office note-book, and then wrote it carefully on a piece of deep blue writing-paper, very thick, with scalloped edges, a Christmas present from a girl-friend the year before. She took the letter to the post herself, calculating how many days it would be before Derek's answer arrived.

But nothing happened. The days passed, and the weeks, and no letter came.

During all this time Mr Smith was quietly going to and from his work, reading his newspaper, chatting with his acquaintances; outwardly calm, while inwardly suffering the most cruel anxiety.

He congratulated himself on pulling out of Charlie Bentham's ring in good time. There was none of his work on hand at the depot when the police raided it, and so long as Charlie did not give him away he saw no reason to fear for his own safety. As far as he could tell, the police were after the meat, Charlie's main trade. The other lines, with any

luck, would drop, without attracting their notice. So long as Charlie and those others who knew him at 'The Bear and Pole' kept their mouths shut.

It was this question of the public-house that gave him most cause for fear. He could not make up his mind which was the safer course; to continue his visits there as a sign of innocence, or to shun the place as a plague-spot. For the first week after Harry Biggs's death he kept away. But when Charlie Bentham and the Wickings had all been taken into custody, had appeared before the magistrates on black-market charges, and been remanded, again in custody, while no one had come to question him personally about his dealings with them, he felt somewhat relieved, and his natural curiosity began to assert itself. If for no other reason, he found it his duty to go and offer condolences to the bereaved mother. Harry's loss must be a hard blow to her, he knew. Besides, he wanted to see her once more because it might be for the last time. He would not tell her that, but the last two letters from Wittington had been very promising, very promising indeed.

To Mr. Smith, threading his way across the public bar, 'The Bear and Pole' seemed to be very much as usual. George Biggs and Peggy were serving the continuous stream of customers, quite in their usual manner. Mr Smith avoided the landlord himself, making his way very discreetly towards the end of the bar, where Peggy was working. At first she did not recognize him; when she did so, she greeted him coolly.

"You don't often come this way," she said, leaning forward to push his pint towards him.

Mr Smith chose coins from a handful before answering.

"Thought I'd see how things were before going in there," he said presently, nodding in the direction of the saloon bar. "Is she . . . does she . . . ?"

"You'll find Mrs Biggs serving as usual," Peggy said crisply. Mr Smith nodded.

"I'll go in and speak to her," he said.

In contrast to the public bar, the saloon was nearly empty.

A respectable-looking couple sat at the table usually occupied by Charlie Bentham and his friends. One elderly man stood at the bar. There was no one else.

Mr Smith went closer. He had drunk his pint in the public far too quickly, and felt disinclined for another long drink. He was put off still further by the sight of Mrs Biggs's set white face behind the bar. He began to wish he had not come in.

But it was too late. She had seen him and acknowledged his arrival with an unsmiling nod. Mr Smith found himself ordering a double whisky.

"You've not been in lately," said Mrs Biggs, with a mechanical smile, counting out his change. "Been on holiday?"

"Going at the end of the month," said Mr Smith. He remembered with a shock the hotel rooms booked at Torquay. He would have to cancel them.

"Hope you get the weather for it."

She was making it impossible for him to say what he had come to say. But he felt it was due to him to overcome the difficulty. He must dissociate himself from the affair; in her eyes as in everyone else's.

"I didn't write," he said at last. "Not much of a hand at putting things on paper. But you know how I feel. . . . Old friends. . . . Fine young fellow. . . ."

His voice tailed off into silence before the hard stare she gave him.

"It was murder," she said, "as sure as I'm sitting here. And they'll pay for it, those responsible. I'm seeing to that. I don't sit 'ere night after night, and hear nothing, so don't think it. They'll find me an awkward witness to set down. I'm going to see justice done, Mr Smith. Harry was young." Her voice cracked a little as she spoke his name. "'E was 'igh-spirited, as who wouldn't want 'im to be. 'E was led astray. Well, they'll pay for it—every one of them. And that's not only Mr Bentham and those Wickings. There's others I know of; they can keep away from this place as long as they like. They won't escape in the end."

She turned away to serve a fresh customer. Mr Smith stood helpless at the bar, sipping his whisky, and feeling cold waves of fear lapping at his heart. He had come back; that was one good thing. But he knew she had not finished; he dared not go yet; he had to stay until he had heard the worst. As the new customer gathered up his glass to move from the bar she turned to him again.

"You knew Mr Bentham pretty well yourself. didn't you?" she said in a thoughtful way.

"Only through my firm," Mr Smith lied. "He 'ad a furniture mart, you may 'ave heard."

"I know that," she answered. "It's been in all the papers nearly every day for a week now. *And* I knew before, naturally."

"A second-hand business it was," went on Mr Smith, through dry lips. "'E used to come up to my firm occasionally in connection with the second-hand trade. He 'ad very wide connections."

Mrs Biggs nodded grimly.

"You're telling me."

"I met 'im at our business warehouse in the first place," said Mr Smith. "Before I knew he was a local man."

The sweat shone on his forehead and his hand, gripping his glass, shook a little.

"Not a personal friend then, I take it," said Mrs Biggs, with an unpleasant edge to her voice. "All in the way of business, eh?"

Mr Smith finished his drink in something of a panic. She insisted on taking him up wrong, but for that reason, if for no other, she was dangerous. He had come there to offer genuine sympathy to a bereaved mother. He found instead a wounded tigress, intent upon revenge. He began to be sorry for George Biggs. In her present mood she was far more formidable than he.

He went on fingering his empty glass, exercising a self-restraint that taunted his nerves almost to breaking point. In the resulting excitement he was prepared to believe that Mrs Biggs had already denounced him as a member of

Charlie's gang. And when at last, saying goodbye to her gravely, with a renewed murmur of sympathy she could not, in decency, reject, he shut the door of 'The Bear and Pole' behind him, his mind was made up. Tomorrow he would wire his acceptance of the latest offer. At the end of the month, the Devonshire holiday abandoned, he and his family would take up their residence in the back premises of their new home in Marine Terrace, Wittington-on-Sea. Already he saw the legend in white paint over the shop front. Arthur Smith. Cabinet Maker. Upholsterer.

Five days went by before Mr Smith gave his tremendous news to his wife and daughter, assembled in the lounge after their supper had been cleared away. The two women seldom paid much attention to what he said, and when he made his announcement Mrs Smith was consulting Netta about the pattern of a knitted jumper in one of the women's magazines.

His little speech fell quite flat. After a few seconds he developed enough exasperation to speak more forcibly.

"You may as well know I've given in my notice to the firm, and I'm going into business on my own account. And you can put down that bloody knitting until you take in what I've said."

This time they heard him. Mrs Smith sat bolt upright on the settle, her red face taking on a shade of purple.

"Don't talk to me like that!" she said fiercely. "And don't talk rot. It can't be done."

"Not only can, but has been," said Mr Smith. "I've bought a little business at Wittington-on-sea. We shall be moving there at the end of the month when my notice is up."

"Have you taken leave of your senses?"

Mr Smith was beginning to enjoy himself. It was a long time since he had been able to give his wife a shock of such dimensions. He meant to make the most of it.

"No, I have not," he said quietly. "I must say you do seem to like making an exhibition of yourself with such senseless remarks. I'm not the first to get on in the world. And I won't be the last that I can see."

"*Get on!* Call this getting on? Throwing over a steady job for a—for a . . . Why, it's only a gamble at best."

"I don't see why," said Netta, speaking for the first time. "Dad knows his trade, don't you, Dad? I was here the time that Mrs Carruthers sent for her chair. The chauffeur carried it down to the car and fixed it in the back and she said Dad was a wonder to do it like he did, with the wood all worm-eaten. It was one of those antiques. Valuable, I suppose. She said it was the tapestry was worth a lot to her for sentimental reasons."

"Lovely bit of work," said her father. "You don't see it often these days. Not lady's work, like that. No patience. Never at home. Always gadding about."

"I'm sure I don't care whether they sew or not," cried Mrs Smith. "What I want to know is whether your father thinks he's serious. Because if so, he's got to have another thought coming, and the sooner the better."

"I am serious," said Mr Smith, "and I won't change." He rose to his feet, taking a stiff parchment paper from his inner pocket as he did so. "I'd let you read this if I thought you'd understand it. But you wouldn't. It's the bill of sale. I've bought the business, and we move at the end of the month."

"But the money?" cried Mrs Smith, her voice rising. "Where did you find the money?"

"I worked for it."

"Privately," said Netta. "You know, through that man . . ."

She stopped speaking, uncomfortably watching comprehension dawn in her mother's face.

"That racket!" whispered Mrs Smith. "Charlie Bentham!" Her face paled. "I ought to give you in charge, I ought. That'd put a stop to this nonsense."

"If you'd rather have me sent down for a couple of years than at Wittington-on-sea, you can. But you'd not be any better off, would you?"

"Give up our lovely home?" said Mrs Smith, breaking down at last, and beginning to sob. "I won't do it. All I've slaved for . . . I won't go. Flat, I won't."

Mr Smith had been waiting for this.

"You needn't," he said. "I'm getting out of here to get out of this cage I'm in, and you're in. I've got to get out or go mad. It's not a new idea. I've been working on it for years. And saving up, too. The most part was saved before ever I met up with Charlie. He come in at the end, and a good job too, because no one can save now with prices and taxes what they are. If I had my life over again I'd never have come to London at all. I'd 'ave stayed in the country, where I was born. But it's too late now. It has to be the next best, and that's Wittington. I work with my hands, see, I make things, even if it's only new covers for chairs and legs on tables, and that. I can't go by all these rules—must do this, must do that, work for so many hours a day, and not a minute more, even if it means finishing the job in hand just where it gets interesting. Down tools according to regulations. Not me! I like to go on till I've done, however long it takes; that is, if I'm interested. You can't do that now, even in an old firm like mine. It's inhuman, that's what it is. The old owners have gone; Mr James was the last of them, retired two months back. No one to come round and say, 'Well, Arthur, that was a job you did for Lady Downing, that was indeed.' Nothing of that. There's managers, but you don't see them. They might not be there. But all the same *we* don't 'ave a say; oh, no. Less than in the old days. They used to ask our opinion, then. Mr James and Mr Henry and the rest. They appreciated our advice. Now it's the Union they consult, or the shop stewards; scared of a strike, that's all. Nothing to do with the quality of the work. Nothing at all. Well, I've 'ad about enough. We may 'ave a sticky time at the start, but I know what I'm worth, and they'll soon find it out. There'll be no one to stop me working the whole ruddy night as well as the day, if I want."

"I think you're mad," said Mrs Smith. She began to rock herself to and fro, dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief.

"You don't need to come," said Mr Smith. "You can stop on 'ere if you want."

"With the house empty and no money coming in?"

Her husband produced his second bombshell.

"I've bought the other place furnished," he said. "Condition of sale. I don't want all your fancy junk. You can keep it and take lodgers, or a married couple. You won't have any trouble letting in a modern house like this."

There was silence for several minutes. Then Mrs Smith said cautiously, "Do you mean that?"

"Naturally I mean it."

"The seaside never did suit me," said Mrs Smith. "Especially the east coast. Far too bracing."

"That's right."

"Netta could give up the office to help me. We could take three, at a pinch, if she and I shared her room. Two in ours, a married couple for preference, and a student in the little room."

The girl interrupted her.

"You can count me out," she said, and drew a deep breath. "I'm going with Dad."

"What's that?"

"You heard. He needs me more than you. Besides . . ."

"Besides what?"

"You don't think I could stand you and your nagging and bossing with him gone, do you?"

Mrs Smith's world turned upside down. She saw Netta move to her father's side to take his arm, clinging close to him. She saw herself opposed by two little fragile forms, alien in shape and mind and intention, implacable enemies, as, at heart, they had always been. She saw herself finally rejected, finally alone. She despised them for the weaklings they were, but she knew that together they were stronger than she. In a transport of rage she lurched out of the room, banging the door behind her.

Mr Smith and his daughter stood hand in hand, while about their lips played gentle, guilty, jubilant smiles.

XXIV

READING the newspaper accounts of Harry Biggs's inquest, and the subsequent black-market trials involving the Bentham gang, so-called, Mrs Eva Collings professed herself glad to have severed her connections with Alf Howard and his dubious family. But in her heart she knew she would regret it for the rest of her life.

It was not that she had ever been in love with Alf. She had never really been in love in her life. Very early, in her teens, her mother had enlightened her about men, and the way they got the better of women. All her early romantic dreams had crumbled to nothing in the bitter blast of that denunciation; but because she had admired her mother very much, she had believed her. In marrying Mr Collings her faith in the hollowness of life had merely been confirmed. True, Alf Howard had seemed for a time, in bringing some comfort, a taste of easy living, of security, into her drab existence, to belie her mother's principles. But not for long. He went, as she ought to have known he would go, as she ought to have expected. Only, behind all her satisfaction in this vindication of her mother's creed, she had sufficient common sense to recognize her own part in the final outcome. She could not disguise her uneasy feeling that a little kindness and sympathy, a less bracing attitude, at the time of his discomfiture, might have put off the final breach, or even rendered it less inevitable.

But it was no good crying over spilt milk, she told herself repeatedly. Fortified by her mother's maxims, and protected in the end by the dullness of her understanding, she went about the work of remaking her existence. First of all she had to clear the prefab of the Howards' possessions. A neighbour volunteered to take them all down to Vincent Street. This immediately made her feel better; she was taking the initiative; attacking; a natural attitude with her. She was casting out, not taking the part of the rejected one. This again satisfied her

sense of justice. But the deed done, and all traces of the Howards removed, she decided she could not stay in Wandsworth. Too many people knew the history of the recent months. She decided to accept at last the invitation of her married sister in Leeds to join her there. So she gave up the prefab, sold her furniture, and one morning in October, dressed in her best, with her personal possessions, including a good many new clothes, in two large new suitcases, she left London for ever.

Mr Howard, receiving his belongings at the hands of the obliging neighbour, felt more kindly towards Mrs Collings than he had since the day of Derek's attack. She had saved him a lot of trouble and embarrassment. He would have abandoned the lot to her rather than face her again in person. He told the neighbour this, and was assured he was well out of it.

His life settled into an unexciting, if strenuous routine. In the morning he got his own breakfast, in the late afternoon, his own tea. His dinner he now ate at the canteen at the Gas Board's repair shop. Every evening, after his meal was disposed of, he settled down to work on the flat. At first this was a programme of simple cleaning, but when the surface dirt of floors and furniture had gone, he saw to what a shocking state the walls and paint had fallen. He had the time and the means. Room by room he scraped, distempered, painted and stained. Maudie should come back to a palace; fit for a king, it was going to be. If that didn't fetch her, and give her back some of her pride and self-respect, nothing would. Anyway, 'The Bear and Pole' was out. There was a rumour George Biggs was moving to another pub belonging to the same brewery. Mrs Biggs had gone a bit queer since Harry's death, so they said. Some people even said she might be in for a serious breakdown. All that didn't concern Maudie any longer. If she hadn't enough to do at home, she could take a couple of hours of a morning cleaning at a private house. Dr Forrest had suggested giving her a couple of hours at his place to help out Mrs Forrest. Not a bad idea, that. She wouldn't mind

obliging the family that had been so good to Derek and Graham.

For Derek the storm blew out with greater violence, but more quickly. He was punished for leaving his unit without securing the right permission, but the question of the gun never reached a level where it could harm him. In a very short time he had worked his way back to his former position, and the whole incident was forgotten.

He was, in fact, becoming an experienced and efficient conscript. He would never be offered promotion from the ranks, but he was universally liked and trusted, as he had been at Pratt's garage. He got used to life in the Army, with the gratifying consequence that it became less and less irksome as the weeks went by.

"It's all right so long as you don't have anything on your mind," he explained to Marion Trent. "I mean nothing outside."

"You mean Graham," she said, smiling up at him.

His heart warmed to her as it often did now. She understood so readily what he was trying to say, almost before he had it clear in his own mind.

"That's right. Dad's going to leave him at Marston's. He's got into the Grammar, and I shouldn't wonder if he goes from there to College."

"What does he want to study?"

"Fish," said Derek simply.

They both laughed.

"No. I mean it," said Derek. "He says it's the science of it he's struck on, whatever that means. I wouldn't know. He's got a brain, that kid."

They were sitting on the grass near the main road across the Hog's Back. At either hand the country fell away in great open sweeps of field and wood and hill. Marion looked across to where the far blue horizon joined the grey-blue clouds above it.

"It isn't only brain that counts," she said.

She had hit the nail on the head, Derek thought. He looked

round at the strong line of her cheek, the firm brown curve of her arm. His hand went out to cover hers.

"Will you go back to—to Pratt's?" she asked, remembering the name with an effort.

"No."

He spoke in a low voice, which made her sorry at once that she had asked him the question. He had told her enough of Syd Williams's death to allow her to understand him now. She waited, willing to leave a proper answer unspoken. But after a short silence Derek went on.

"I couldn't go back there. But it'll have to be cars and that. I don't know how to do anything else. Besides, there's a lot in it."

"Of course there is."

"I'd like to get a position outside London. I don't fancy living there again; too crowded, for one thing. I've had enough of that in the Army. But not too far to get up to see Graham."

"Stansford'd do you," murmured Marion, half shy, half laughing.

"That's right."

He drew closer to her, until they were touching: his arm shifted to take her waist. Her head moved naturally to his shoulder.

He was comfortable with her like that, satisfied, happy. He still thought of her as a kid, preferring to think of her that way. She did not yet rouse him as Netta had, because she was an old friend. Perhaps she never would. But she gave him ease and confidence, and her physical nearness, without inspiring passion, did succeed in freeing him of his obsession, so that his thoughts turned more healthily to himself and his own future.

From the day of Syd Williams's death until now he had not allowed himself to do this. It had seemed, in a distorted way, disloyal. Syd had gone, his future ended; Jean's future was wrecked, little Marie's warped by the lopping of her chief support and shelter. He had been able to think only of the tragedy that had befallen his most valued friends, feeling

again and again the guilt that had overcome him that morning, a guilt not relieved by knowing his crime had failed.

But now as he sat clasping Marion, and letting his eyes wander over the serene spaces below them, he saw again the strange potent look in the dying man's eyes, the light that had proclaimed, in that obscure, most ordinary room, invincibly, humbly, the unending, transcendent, indestructible power of love.

It was a truth revealed. He was ready now to accept that. Forever now it would lie in his mind, directing his growth, governing his actions, to be forgotten, to be remembered, always in the end to be remembered. For it supplied, however vaguely, an essential need, it filled the vacuum of the crude material creed in which he had been reared. Already it was lifting his heart and setting him free, alike from the fear of death and the more immediate fear of life.

Marion stirred against his shoulder. It was about time he kissed her, she thought. It seemed to her she had waited a very long time indeed.

"What's up?" he asked, looking down sideways at the dark hair against his khaki battledress.

"Nothing."

He brought his other arm round to hold her close. She raised her face a little. He saw how smooth her cheek was, the skin clear and fresh and golden-brown. It made him think of the baby's little cheek in the pram when he had uncovered it.

"You don't half look serious," said Marion lazily. "Tell me what you're thinking."

"I was thinking of the Terror."

"Thinking of *what*?"

"Your little brother."

She was bitterly disappointed. Always little brothers. He must be a bit cracked, in spite of his good looks.

"Whatever made you think of him?"

"Your face. Your skin's as smooth as a baby's."

"Go on!"

She was enjoying this; it was rather a sweet thing to say,

come to think of it. She wanted to hear more. But he only blushed and looked away.

"I'm not laughing," she said gently, moving her head back against his neck. "I adore babies."

"Do you really? Do you mean it?"

"Of course I mean it. It's only natural."

She could not know that her simple words had broken away the last fine threads of illusion that bound him to Netta. She did not guess that the arms tightening about her belonged to an older, more clear-seeing Derek than the young recruit who had come to re-visit his childhood's home. In his rewarding kiss she felt only that all her dreams had come true.